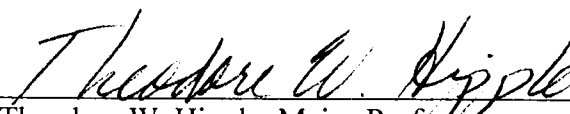
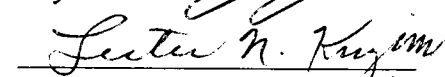
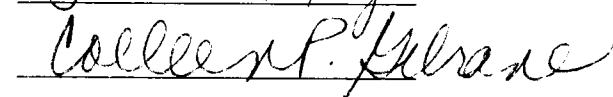


To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by S. David Gill entitled "Aidan Chambers: A Critical Biography." I have examined the final copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education, with a major in Education.


Theodore W. Hipple, Major Professor

We have read this dissertation
and recommend its acceptance:

Accepted for the Council:


Associate Vice Chancellor and
Dean of The Graduate School

AIDAN CHAMBERS:
A CRITICAL BIOGRAPHY

A Dissertation
Presented for the
Doctor of Education
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

S. David Gill
May 1998

DEDICATION

To Deborah Lea Gill
my wife

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I owe a debt of gratitude to the members of my committee: Colleen Gilrane, Karl Jost, Lester Knight, and Ted Hipple for their unwavering support. I am particularly grateful to Dr. Gilrane, for going beyond the call so many times, and to Dr. Hipple, who convinced me to write again.

I am also indebted to my wife Deb, my kids Justin, Callie, and Delaney, and my in-laws, Dr. and Mrs. James D. Tillman.

Finally, I can't thank Mr. Aidan Chambers enough for cooperating in several trans-Atlantic interviews about his work and about himself. He was always gracious and showed great patience in answering my questions.

ABSTRACT

Respected as a critic, editor, and a writer, Chambers is recognized as an expert in the field of children's and Young Adult literature. He has published novels, academic works, and edited mystery series. He and his wife publish periodicals devoted to children's literature, and to top it off, he has written plays. His career has spanned four decades: because he is a meticulous writer, however, his production is more like that of a James Joyce (to whom he has been favorably compared) than that of more prolific writers.

More popular in his native England than in the US, Chambers is a stylist of the first order, an engaging writer of novels that are unsurpassed in linguistic skill. In a 1984 article for *English Journal*, G. Robert Carlsen wrote that "[t]he best that can be said for most teenage books is that they are good journalistic writing." Chambers work is far from journalistic, owing more to the traditions of William Faulkner than to the pedestrian prose symptomatic of many Young Adult novels. One of Chambers' novels, *Dance on My Grave* (1982), was selected as ALA Best Books for Young Adults. Another, *Breaktime*, was a *School Library Journal* "Best Book" (Spring 1979). He has received international acclaim for other children's books, and is a noted scholar/critic of children's literature.

This dissertation explores the life history of an accomplished writer, critic, and scholar. It also turns a critical eye toward Chambers' work in order to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of those works. Chambers has written two types of adolescent

v
novels, each aimed at a different audience. The novels in his yet-to-be-completed sextet are meant to appeal to the brightest, most literate young adult readers. They are complex works, both stylistically and thematically, and they have influenced critics to ask more of novelists who write for young adults. His other novels are simpler books written in traditional narrative, but they still display his enormous stylistic talents.

Chapter One of this dissertation is a short introduction to Chambers. Chapter Two looks at Chambers as a writer, while Chapter Three provides detailed biographical information about him. The analysis of his "sextet" comprises Chapter Four. The "minor" works are treated in Chapter Five. Chapter Six looks at the work Chambers is currently completing and attempts to predict the directions in which his career will go in the next few years.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. THE ENVELOPE	1
II. AUTHOR, TEACHER, MONK	3
Pushing the Envelope	4
The Struggle to Learn	7
The Mature Author	13
III. THE LIFE	17
IV. THE SEXTET	28
<i>Breaktime</i>	29
<i>Dance on My Grave</i>	41
<i>NIK: Now I Know</i>	51
<i>The Toll Bridge</i>	57
V. MINOR WORKS AND CHARACTERS	68
<i>Cycle Smash</i>	68
<i>Seal Secret</i>	70
<i>The Present Takers</i>	76
Minor Characters: Parents and Teachers	80
VI. THE ONCE AND FUTURE CHAMBERS	85
REFERENCES	90
VITA	94

CHAPTER I

The Envelope

The envelope is brown, the color of day-old Darjeeling with cream. You find it in the day's mail, larger than the other envelopes, conspicuous by its size. You rub the envelope with your fingers. It has a waxy feel, unlike the kind of paper you're used to. You notice the postage stamp of Queen Elizabeth. The color is lime green, and the stamp is an odd size. The small circle of the postmark bears the name Gloucestershire and the 63 pence postage reveals that this letter has traveled a long way to reach you. In the left-hand corner, the words *air mail* are handwritten and covered with a decal for *por avion*, which, of course, means air mail.

Your name heads the address, followed by your street, city, zip code, and in large letters, U. S. A. The handwriting is a contradiction, the letters wild, full of peaks and valleys, the I's dotted as if tacked into place, but the lines are perfectly straight in a row. On the back is a return address, and you suddenly know who sent the letter.

On the way up the driveway, you think about a speech the author gave at the 1996 National Council of Teachers of English Convention. The hotel conference room was packed with eager faces waiting for the speaker to be introduced. Nearby the lectern stood a distinguished man, gray-haired with glasses--calm to the casual observer. In his possession, written in long-hand, was a speech he intended to deliver to his audience. Though no one was able to tell at the time, the ink had hardly dried on the paper: he had

waited until the last minute to decide what he wanted to say, uncharacteristic of a man who measures his words by the ounce, who takes years to finish one novel. He gave the speech, and as he finished each page of address, he peeled the page of paper up, tore each lengthwise then sideways and set the remnants aside: the words having been said, there was no need to save them.

You wait until you are inside to open your letter. You tear up one corner and run a finger along the top seam to split the envelope. Inside, the stationery is white and thick. The letter is typed impeccably, but the salutation is handwritten in the same manuscript that had adorned the front of the envelope. You read the letter, laughing at the author's wit, amazed at the ease with which he writes. This is indeed an accomplished wordsmith, for you can hear his voice in the words as surely as if the two of you were having a chat over afternoon tea. He has agreed to help with the study of his work. And he ends with "best wishes," signing his letter with the same scribble, so that only the "A" is legible. The name of the bottom of the letter is Aidan Chambers, and you can't wait to tell his story.

CHAPTER II

Author, Teacher, Monk

Ask an intellectual snob about the literary merits of adolescent literature, and you may get a bird's eye view of his nostrils as he pokes his nose in the air and dismisses the genre as being void of any such merit. You could write this reaction off as intellectual snobbery or as the knee-jerk reaction of someone ignorant of Young Adult (YA) literature. You might console yourself that this person's only contact with YA was a mass market horror novel churned out with all the integrity of processed cheese food. Then again, you might take a hard look at the canon of adolescent literature and point to certain authors who write what critics term "literary" fiction.

Such a literary writer is Aidan Chambers, one of the few adolescent novelists who is challenging in both his subject matter and his style. Respected as a critic, an editor, and a writer, Chambers is recognized as an expert in the field of children's and Young Adult literature. He has published fiction, drama, academic works, and edited literature series for adolescents. He and his wife run Thimble Press, which publishes books and periodicals devoted to children's literature, and to top it off, he has started another press with a partner. His career has spanned four decades: because he is a meticulous writer, however, his production is more like that of a James Joyce (to whom he has been favorably compared) than that of an R.L. Stine.

Obviously, he is not trying to be wealthy. He writes in *Something about the Author Autobiography Series* (Chambers, 1991) that he is a writer because, "because I don't know what I am till I read what I've written. I can think without talking; I exist only by writing myself into being...If I do not write I become ill. Writing, for me, is not an option; it is a necessity" (p. 40).

Pushing the Envelope

More popular internationally than in his native England and the US, Chambers is a stylist of the first order, an engaging writer of novels that are unsurpassed in linguistic skill. In a 1984 article for *English Journal*, G. Robert Carlsen writes that "[t]he best that can be said for most teenage books is that they are good journalistic writing." Chambers' work is far from journalistic, owing more to the traditions of William Faulkner than to the pedestrian prose symptomatic of many Young Adult novels. One of Chambers' novels, *Dance on My Grave* (1982), was selected as an "ALA Best Books for Young Adults." Another, *Breaktime*, was a "School Library Journal Best Book" for 1979 (Telgen 1990, p. 61).

Though he has received international acclaim for his fiction, he began his publishing career as a playwright. *Johnny Salter* (1965) and *The Car* (1966) were his first plays to see print. These were followed by *The Chicken Run* (1968), a two-act play that drew a rave review from a critic who called the work a "rare phenomenon in the theatre; a well-written and interesting play for young people" (Rendle, 1968, p.62). Chambers made

his reputation as an experimentalist with the novels *Breaktime* (1979) and *Dance on My Grave* (1982).

Many critics consider *Breaktime* to be his finest work, which they have compared favorably to Joyce's *Ulysses* (Telgen 1990, p. 60) The novels written after *Dance on My Grave*--*NIK: Now I Know* and *The Toll Bridge*--are by far the most stylistically pleasing and challenging work he has produced. In these novels he uses a variety of techniques to tell the story. For example, in each of his major novels, he has been known to employ traditional third person narrative, first person narrative, alternating speakers, newspaper clippings, field notes, and transcripts to relate stories in a style as intricate as his characters' motivations.

Chambers' experiments with the form and function of fiction grew as much from his childhood cinematic experiences as from his desire to push the envelope of his craft. From a young age, "going to the pictures," was his favorite past time. In *Something about the Author Autobiography Series*, he writes that:

[t]hough the single most vivid image remains the moment when Judy Garland opened the black-and-white door onto the full Technicolor wonder of the yellow brick road in *The Wizard of Oz*. [He] remember[s] the gasp of rhapsodic awe the audience let out with one voice as we watched (p. 38).

The atmosphere of the theatre appealed to his solitary nature because he "loved the snug hiddenness of the dark cinema, the smell, the smoke-filled beam of light shining onto the screen, the ice cream...the utterly absorbed attention of an audience captured by a film, the satisfied, slightly melancholy feeling when it was all over and [he] walked

home playing with the after images in [his] head.” This ritual was his preferred form of entertainment for many years, from when Chambers was “first taken as a babe-in-arms three weeks old and [he] attended at least once and usually twice a week until [he] was twenty-five...” (p. 38).

The countless hours of watching film had an impact on Chambers’ writing, especially beginning with his work on *Breaktime*:

[The] way [he] write[s] stories, perhaps even the way [he] read[s] them, owes more to those hundreds of hours spent watching movies than to anything else. Movies are the old clothes of [his] imagination, comfortable and easy to wear. Yet they have never mattered to [him] in the way that books matter: [he] can live without movies; [he] couldn't live without books (p. 47).

The act of reading, of holding a physical text in his hands, appealed to Chambers’ sense of aesthetic. Other media were fleeting, but books were permanent:

[I]f [he] want[s] quick pastime thrills, easy entertainment, [he] watch[es] a film. If [he] want[s] instant reaction, here-now-and-gone, the-next-second-observation of the world, [he] watch[es] television. Writing and reading (two sides of the same coin) of novels, stories, and poems are the opposite of these. They are about looking at the past and holding on to the present and digging deep into both then and now in such a way that [he] can discover something of what they mean—of what life itself means (Donelson, 1997, p. 363).

The Struggle to Learn

Chambers' love affair with books did not happen at first sight, however. A slow student, his early problems in reading were exacerbated by a succession of poor teachers, including one he described as "a sadist" (p. 39). This teacher was a "tall, thin man, lazy and humourless ...an enthusiastic user of the cane, a three-foot long piece of thin bamboo which was thrashed across the palm of the hand as a punishment for wrongdoing" (p. 50). Wrongdoing was any behavior that violated the teacher's rigid rules or a lack of achievement in class. Young Aidan was caned every Friday because his studies were not good enough.

Chambers believes that his teacher's "much greater abuse, however, was that he beat out of [him] any vestige of self-confidence [he] still possessed. [He has] ever since been unable to make [himself] believe that [he] can succeed at anything...that requires [him] to write" (p. 39).

Like Nobel laureate John Steinbeck, whose struggles with reading led him to hate words, Chambers continued to languish as a student and as a writer until he discovered fiction. Learning that words had a voice and that the voice could open new worlds to him turned Chambers into an avid, though not especially speedy, reader. By the time he was able to enter a school on the academic track, he was in a position to accept the guidance of a fine English teacher, a man whose love of language shaped Chambers' consciousness. The teacher was Jim Osburn, "the head of English, a man of such forceful personality and a teacher of such rigor that many people feared him" (p. 40). Osburn

could be a difficult personality. He had a biting wit that could turn cruel, but to Chambers, his unwavering devotion to literature was “an inspiration” (p. 40).

In class, Osburn demanded that his students read in order:

to examine every text in the minutest detail. He demanded that language be used precisely [and] that [students] should not waste time reading books he regarded as other than first rate. To some he seemed an arrogant snob. To others...he was an uncompromising defender of writing and reading literature against the philistines (p. 40).

Chambers paid homage to Osburn by making him a character in the novel *Dance on My Grave*. The fictional Osburn is a strong-willed teacher bent on protecting the protagonist while simultaneously coercing him to attend a university so that he can become an English literature teacher. In this case, fiction imitated life, because it was the real Jim Osburn who pushed Chambers “into the Debating and Dramatic Societies...who introduced [him] to serious professional theatre and to Shakespeare on the stage” (p. 40). And it was Osburn who escorted Aidan home one night, walked into his parents’ house and announced that the young man was going to be sent to college, where he would study to become an English teacher.

So powerful was Osburn’s personality that neither Chambers nor his parents questioned the edict. He eventually did what his teacher instructed. Though he did not have the courage to defy Osburn’s wishes, he had already decided what would be his vocation: he “wanted to write fiction” (p. 41). Osburn had taught Chambers to love literature, but it was a book that planted the seed of his compulsion to write:

[W]hen [he] was fifteen, the night [he] finished reading D. H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*...Paul Morel's life seemed so like [his] own—the first time [he] had experienced such a recognition—that [he wished to] have written it. Having thought this, [he] found [himself] wondering why [he] shouldn't, and immediately started writing a novel. It was never finished but the desire to go on survived (Olendorf, 1992, p. 30).

So off Chambers went to college to become a teacher. While there, he produced plays and a one-act drama, *Everyman's Everybody*, which a schoolmate referred to as a poor man's *Waiting for Godot*. He did little serious writing during the next few years, which he spent as a grammar school teacher in the resort town of Southend (a locale he would later feature in *Dance on My Grave*), and subsequently as an Anglican monk. To continue his work with young people, he joined a new order with the same goal. There, he began to produce plays again (Chambers, 1991, p. 45). In late 1962, he produced an adaptation of Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. He thought he could squelch the urge to write, but, as he wrote in *SAAS*, he “had not counted on the power of obsession.” He began, he says, “suffering from blinding migraine headaches and was forced to consult [a physician who told him], ‘There's nothing the matter with you physically...there's something missing from your life. When you find out what it is and put it back, you'll be all right again...’” (p. 47).

Chambers knew immediately what was missing from his life when he “took an exercise book from school and started writing a story called *First Date*. It was intended as a novel for the young teenagers [he] was teaching.” (p. 47). He had certain goals in mind

with this piece. He hoped to write a new kind of literature aimed at his students. “[M]ost of the books...were about people quite different from the boys and girls [he] was teaching—children of working-class families living in the changing social and cultural circumstances of the early 1960s” (p. 58). Over time, Chambers came to believe one reason his students “were not keen readers was that they nowhere recognized themselves in books we offered them to read” (p. 58). He has described adolescents as a class that had been ignored by society and its literature. As a class, they had been oppressed, and “[l]ike all oppressed people they needed a literature of their own...” (p. 48). Another quibble he has had with older adolescent literature is its style, or lack thereof. The writing he and his students encountered was often antiquated, the phrasing awkward compared to modern standards, and the themes explored had little in common with the lives of young adult readers. In teaching, Chambers was presented with a dilemma. How could he expect teenagers to relate to this literature when it “bored [him]; how could [he] expect it to excite...unliterary pupils?” (p. 48).

This dilemma gave him the opportunity to unleash his long-inhibited desire to write. If there was no good adolescent literature to be had, then he would create it, much the way a craftsman will build his own tools when none is available. So he began writing a novel. This initial piece, *First Date*, a “story based...how to cope with their first sexual relations with girls” took him two years to complete. No publisher would accept the manuscript, but the fire inside Chambers would not allow him to stop because it was like letting the proverbial cat out of the bag (*Chambers, 1991, p. 49*).

Using the rationale that his pupils had no YA drama, either, Chambers tried his hand at being a playwright. He remembered how much teenagers had enjoyed *Tom Sawyer*, mostly, he surmised because the main characters were in their teens. The play writing fared better than the attempt at a novel. *Johnny Salter*, a comedy, debuted in December 1965. He had drawn inspiration for the play from his “pupils creating for themselves during improvised drama sessions” (p. 49). The play was an instant hit and drew the attention of the drama editor of Heinemann Books. Heinemann decided to publish *Johnny Salter*, which was a surprise. He had written the play with no intention of publishing it. *Johnny Salter* hit the bookshelves a year later, which coincided with the debut of a second successful play, *The Car* (Olendorf, 1992, p. 33).

By 1967, Chambers had “published two plays with a third on the stocks, written two short novels both soon to be published, been commissioned to write a book about teenagers as readers, become a frequent public speaker, reviewer and journalist, and was editing a list of paperback novels” (Chambers, 1991, p. 50) But success in one area of his life had disrupted another part of it. The other brothers in the Community were wary of the attention he was drawing to himself. Because of he knew he could not stop writing, Chambers felt compelled to leave the order.

Soon afterward, he met and then married an American ex-patriate, Nancy Lockwood, and became “a full-time free-lance writer, a risky course of action everybody except Nancy advised [him] not to take” (p. 51). But he knew that this discouragement only proved that it was the right decision. He soon began a career as a freelance writer

writing a series of articles, and publishing *The Reluctant Reader*, a non-fiction book about reading.

During this time he published novels, and established himself as a respected critic of children's and YA literature. In time he decided to write another novel. He'd planned to write another mainstream novel, but he realized it didn't feel right. Under pressure to make a living from his writing, to create a marketable book, he felt like he had betrayed himself and his students. He was no longer writing to his audience and was on the verge of becoming a hack. He felt "locked...into the need to make money from something that meant too much...to mistreat..." (p. 53). He became despondent and for days did no writing. In a fit of desperation, he decided to begin writing, to see where that would take him. He ordered himself to get busy, and "grabbed a brand-new notebook, a brand-new pencil, sat .. .in an easy chair," (p. 54) and told himself to write the first things that came to mind and not to stop until he was ready.

The new novel began with the provocative statement: "Literature is crap." But he did not know the character who made the statement, and moreover, had no clue as to whom or what the character was trying to provoke. Chambers continued writing "and an hour and a half later possessed a few pages of an incomprehensible scene involving two boys, Morgan, and another who seemed to be the protagonist...Ditto" (p. 54). This novel, *Breaktime*, took two years to finish, and he had no more hope of getting it published than he had had with the first one. Because of the experimental narrative and explicit sex scenes, he thought his publisher would reject *Breaktime*. He was correct. Heinemann

passed, and he sent the manuscript to Bodley Head, a well-respected house known for publishing such writers as Maurice Sendak, Betsy Byars, and Paul Zindel.

Surprisingly, (to Chambers), Bodley agreed to publish *Breaktime*, when “Margaret Clark, the young people's fiction editor, accepted the book enthusiastically” (Chambers, 1991, p. 53). He and Clark worked together throughout the publication of his subsequent books, until her retirement. They did not work on many books together, though their relationship spanned decades, because as Chambers explains:

None of the books that matter to me has been written in less than three years.

Dance on My Grave took twelve years, start to finish, *NIK: Now I Know* took five. That's why I need other things to do so that I'm not suffocated by a book.

I've never been happy with pastime hobbies. Publishing and teaching provide me with a release. That they are socially useful gives me satisfaction. And around and through, before, during, and after all this, I read. I cannot imagine ever writing anything if I didn't read (p. 55).

The Mature Author

Now a critical success, Chambers has settled into a regular publishing routine. By his count it takes five years to finish a novel. He is a stylistic perfectionist because he tries “to put the best of [himself] into each one.” The outcome is a densely detailed book, which can be a challenge for the average reader to digest. Chambers isn't surprised his work takes “time and thought to unpack,” since he hopes that “those who spend the time

will be rewarded with the same richness of pleasure and lasting satisfaction that I gain from writing them" (p. 55).

Then again, the average reader looking for the average read isn't Chambers' target audience. On purpose, he writes his books "for readers who are...not looking only for quick one-read thrills, but who are prepared to read again, this passage and that, and maybe the whole book, knowing that each time they'll find something more than they first set out to find." Another goal he has is to write..."something that will make them think and feel differently—even if only a little differently—from what they've ever thought and felt so consciously before" (p. 55).

His craft is of utmost importance to him. He struggles to find the right word, the right structure. The compulsion to do things right is one he learned:

One of the most important things [he] learned from [his] parents was a solid admiration for craft skill...[and] the qualities of careful preparation, of detailed knowledge of and respect for the materials... of the beauty and use of tools, of pride in the work no matter for whom it is done. The craft skill of ordinary men and women is what keeps the human world going (p. 54).

His writing is far from the commercial fare that many YA publishers view as product. He makes the distinction between being a writer and an author, preferring the latter. In his terminology a writer is "someone who uses written words to communicate to a known audience, rather as [his] father used wood to make objects for known customers. All writers are craftspeople, or ought to be" (p. 54). He views authors as artists, more akin to sculptors who:

know about craft, but hack a shape out of language without thinking about the customer at the time of making the object. Their concern is with the material—language—and with the work itself. The drive they feel is to bring some kind of meaning into being, a meaning they themselves need to understand, and which they discover only in the making. When the object is made then they start thinking about customers—about readers (p. 54).

As a former English teacher, Chambers knows the creature we call an adolescent, but does not write down to his audiences. Chambers says that he makes the following assumptions about readers: the first is that “whatever their age [adolescents] are...capable...at dealing with every aspect of life, however serious or disturbing or lighthearted or trivial” (Donelson, 1997, p. 362).

With this in mind, he makes “no restrictions on what [his] stories can include...If the main character in the story, the young protagonist, could actually know something, do something, or observe it happening in ‘real life,’ then it is okay to include it in the book” (Donelson, 1997, p. 363). Secondly, Chambers assumes that readers “enjoy the English language...that they take pleasure in playing with it and in adding more of it to what they already know” so that he makes no “concessions, no limitations in the language. What the story and its characters need is the language that they get” (Donelson, 1997, p. 363).

So why would Chambers use his considerable talents on teenagers when he could aim his work at a more mature audience? He says:

it is in adolescence that we face for the first time all the great questions of life and deal with them freshly...[I]t's an old saying: writers choose the books they

write; authors are chosen by the books they find they must write. For me, it isn't a question of choice (Chambers, 1991, p. 53).

Chambers also believes "that people in their teens want to grow up and want to be grown-up... Most of the young people I know are just as interested in other, quite different people, and in how the world 'works'—how life is lived, and how it can be lived. So my stories are about growing up and how you become the full-grown self you most want to be" (Donelson, 1997, p. 363). By choosing to appeal to the intellectual adolescents, however, Chambers has assured himself of not being on the best sellers list. This fact does not bother him, as he says, "To tell the truth, I'm not very interested in the size of my sales. Naturally, I need a readership big enough to keep my books in print, otherwise they won't be available for anyone to read. But more than anything I want readers who give themselves, not to me as a writer, but to the books, to the stories, to the language, and who give themselves thoughtfully as much as passionately" (Donelson, 1997, p. 363).

CHAPTER III

The Life

Aidan Chambers does not come from a background conducive to being a literary artist. His father, a woodworker by trade, was not part of the upper class, and Chambers' early education left much to be desired. He was born at home in Chester-le-Street, a tiny coal town in the northeast part of England, on December 27th, 1934. According to his autobiography in *Something about the Author Autobiography Series*, his birth occurred two weeks early, but he has "been a slow learner and early for appointments ever since" (p. 37). An only child, Chambers tended to be shy: he has "ever since preferred being at home to being anywhere else. There were no brothers or sister" which may [have] led him to "have never felt comfortable in crowds, which, for [him], mean more than five people in one place" (p. 37).

He had one friend, Marion Rose, who lived two houses away. They were, writes Chambers in *SAAS*, "bosom friends in our prams and remained so until [he] was taken to live in another town at the age of ten, after which [he] hardly ever saw her again" (p. 37). They were the "only children who lived in the terrace so [they] had the run of the place...If [they] were bored [they would] go 'seeing'" (p. 37).

This freedom to move about did not turn Aidan into an undisciplined child. In fact, it may have had the opposite effect. By his own admission, he was "a well-behaved

child rather too keen to please, and chronically shy in the company of strangers, perhaps because I saw so few" (p. 38). He had few social opportunities to overcome his shyness. His parents were not the type to entertain. There were few family visitors to the household, and the only relatives he remembers coming to stay with them were his Aunt Anne and an uncle who played cricket (Chambers, 1991, p. 39).

The other frequent visitor was Chambers' paternal grandmother, a demanding woman who was part of a wealthy family, but turned out to be a rebellious youth. Her father was a ship captain who kept a chest the children were not allowed to open. Chambers' grandmother did, however, and found a fireworks rocket that she immediately set off. Unfortunately, it was not fireworks but a distress rocket that "shot away over the house and smashed through the huge stained-glass north window of the parish church across the village green" (Chambers, 1991, p. 39).

Chambers describes his grandmother as "elegant, a voracious reader, an accomplished letter-writer and amateur painter, cooked delicious, beautifully presented meals (a skill she had had to teach herself after marrying George, for as a girl she had been waited on hand and foot), demanded impeccable manners, and was an enormous snob" (p. 49). Chamber's mother's side of the family was much different. His mother came from a family of coal miners. Peter, her father, was a miner who, unlike the boisterous Grandmother Chambers, was "small, quiet, gentle, unassuming, and spent the larger part of his working life "lying on his side while hacking coal out of a narrow seam with a pick" (p. 39). His wife, however, was the dominant force in the family.

As can be expected, neither of Chambers' grandmothers got along with the other. Chambers describes them as "chalk and cheese, despising each other so heartily that they didn't [until] death made communication, in this life at any rate, impossible" (p. 39). Throughout his childhood, he observed an almost universal ritual. He was scrubbed and dressed and trundled off to visit his grandparents for, in this case, tea. It was during these visits that he learned how to mind his manners, how to gossip frequently and how to entertain himself. "Grandma Chambers," he writes in *SAAS*, "would school [him] in the social graces, chat to [him] about [his] doings during the week, quiz [him] for family gossip," (p. 40) then set him on his way to see his other grandmother. His other grandmother, sitting in the living room with various aunts, greeted him with "[o]verwhelming kisses and hugs [that] had to be endured" Often to avoid the juicy social commentary, he was sent off to the sitting room where, he writes:

there was a gramophone, itself not used since the daughters had grown up, on which [he] played the three records in the collection, one of Bing Crosby, one of Fred Astaire, and one of Stanley Holloway doing his monologue about Albert and the Lion. [He] liked Astaire best, dancing cheek to cheek, though [he] never liked him in films at that age(p. 40).

The one thing Chambers did enjoy at that age and for the rest of adolescence was films. But there was little else in a town inhabited by "the families of miners, butchers, bricklayers, delivery men, and craftsmen like [his] father (p. 37). It was a quiet life, one that allowed him to avoid much of the trauma of the second world war. His father was not allowed to enlist in the armed forces in order to continue his job as an undertaker.

Though his father was not fond of staying away from the action of the war, Chambers was fortunate to have both of his parents about. Life, though not immediately dangerous, was sparse during the time. The Chambers family had to be resourceful, as Chambers explains: "[They] never suffered from a bombing raid, though [they] heard Newcastle getting it. Food was short, but the hens [they] kept and the garden [his] father cultivated-- he was a superb gardener--meant [they] never went without" (p. 40).

His father and mother helped with the war effort by serving as a policeman and a nurse, respectively. The lasting memory of the period in time, however, was what Chambers describes in *SAAS* as:

the nervous tension, a mix of fear and excitement, that pervaded everything and infected everybody, a tremble of anticipatory anxiety [he] still feel[s] today, fifty years later, not as a memory but as a present reality, that something dreadful is about to happen, something that will destroy life as [he] have known it and replace it with an unimaginable existence that will be much worse" (p. 40).

Chambers was busy fighting his own personal war during childhood. Ironically, for a gifted writer, it was with school. Or rather, school battled him, and he lost. A shy boy, he was not immediately popular, and his inability to quickly master repetitive tasks led him to being labeled "slow." This was his war, Chambers writes in *SAAS*:

I did badly from the first day. I hated the crowded rollabout life of the playground, being totally unused to playing with anyone but Marion, and not knowing how to make friends. In class, I couldn't seem to grasp what I was

supposed to do, nor the point of what I was made to do--learn letters of the alphabet and copy them onto a slate with a thin little chalk pencil (p. 41).

What he was experiencing is a common psychological syndrome associated with going to school for the first time. Though he was eager to please his teachers, Aidan found it an impossible task: his days were filled with apprehension and fear of failure. Unlike other children, he didn't adapt well, and school continued to be war until a new teacher, Miss Ainsley, took over the class of boys (schools were segregated according to sex) and in essence, saved him. Miss Ainsley made school tolerable because she read stories aloud to the class and even performed impromptu plays, one of which ended with Aidan being crowned King of the Jews (p. 41).

Despite Miss Ainsley's positive influence, he still found reading difficult. He could understand the alphabet and read individual words, but forming meaning from sentences proved almost impossible. His problems with arithmetic were even more devastating: numbers had no meaning to him at all. The only solace the head teacher could give him was that "He's slow to take things in, but once in he remembers them." (p. 41). After Miss Ainsley, his schooling was provided by a string of uninspired teachers. Quite by accident, one day he picked up a book, and as he describes in *SAAS*, it spoke to him:

Suddenly as [he] puzzled over the words on the page [he] heard voices speaking in [his] head. The voices were coming from the printed words and were talking to each other and telling a story. [He] sat in amazement listening

to this drama of which [he] can now only recall that it was set on a desert island and was quite adventurous (p. 42).

He didn't become a literate reader immediately but developed the skill over time. But he did come to admire books as books for their look, their smell, and their touch. It satisfied him to hold a book, a characteristic of reading which "still gives ... as much pleasure as any other." He gives full credit for his ultimate success as a reader to Miss Ainsley because she "had prepared [his] imagination by reading aloud ... so often and by helping ... to live the words and interpret them by acting the stories" (p. 42).

In 1945, Chambers and his family moved to Darlington, which is located on the River Tees, where the elder Chambers worked as director of a funeral home. The move, according to Chambers, did not suit him: he "hated leaving Glen Terrace...hated leaving Marion...hated Darlington, and...hated the semi-detached three bedroomed house into which [they] moved, with its cramped strip of back garden on an ugly suburban estate" (p. 42). He felt that his parents, the people he trusted most, had betrayed him, and he marks the move as the end of his childhood. He has "never since felt at home anywhere or completely trusted anyone" (p. 42).

An advantage that Darlington had over Chester-le-Street was its educational system. Where the old schools were staffed with dull teachers, the new ones boasted energetic educators who helped Aidan improve. They had too much ground to make up with him, however, and he flunked the examination that determined whether he went on to an academic or non-academic track. He went to a "secondary modern" school close-by. There he made a few friends and continued to excel as a learner. His effort earned

him a transfer to an academic school, Queen Elizabeth I Grammar School. There he enrolled in English courses taught by his future mentor Jim Osburn, the teacher he credits most with inspiring him to teach.

After a compulsory stint in the British Navy that ended in 1955, Chambers began his college career with "the enthusiasm of a man released from jail and enjoyed every day of the next two years" (Chambers, 1991, p. 43). He immersed himself in the academic atmosphere. His college was near the heart of London's theatre district, and he wallowed in the potpourri of dramatic offerings, which ranged from classical Shakespearean theatre to the latest avant garde productions. He joined in with a group of friends who were like him: intelligent, energetic, and young. They were also Christians who expressed their beliefs so convincingly that they got Chambers' attention. Little did he know then what an important role religion would play in his life. He had always been interested in religion, but as an idea, not as practice. His group of friends argued him into trying worship as practice rather than an intellectual exercise, and he agreed to do it. His roommate at the time convinced him to attend an Anglo-Catholic church, Saint Margaret's Leigh on the Sea in order to get a taste of what it was like. Chambers was overwhelmed:

The drama of the Anglo-Catholic mass, with its understated, beautifully choreographed ritual, appealed to [his] liking for theatre. And more than that, the language of the Anglican version of the Psalms and the 1662 prayer book, the King James Bible, and the hymns of George Herbert and the other great English versifiers and divines who wrote around the time when the English

language was at its finest--the language we usually associate with Shakespeare--
 -appealed to [his] love of literature and of critical interpretation (p. 43).

Chambers' first job after college was "teaching English and drama at Westcliff High School for Boys, a grammar school in Southend-on-Sea"...the setting he used *for Dance on My Grave* (p. 44). He made it to Southend with:

just enough money to see [him] through...a suitcase of spare clothing...and an exhilarating sense of an end and a beginning: an end to constricted adolescence, to being a son supported by parents, a boyfriend expected to be a husband, a student required to pass exams; and the beginning of an independent life which gave [he] the chance to become what [he] truly wanted to be: a skilled teacher and, above all, a published writer (p. 44).

While teaching, he continued his relationships with his circle of college friends. Religion began to play a larger role in his life. After a summer spent thinking about joining the church, Chambers asked a friend, John Bundock, to help him prepare for confirmation into the church. Not one to do things halfway, he decided to pursue religion at its most extreme practice. He decided to join a monastic order. His friend Bundock tried to talk Chambers out of the decision, but after seeing that his friend was serious, Bundock persuaded Chambers to seek another order besides the Franciscans. One of the tenets of Franciscan life is to toil in the earth as an act of penance. Chambers despised gardening. He had other conflicts with them as well, knowing that they would assign him a job that served the community and would not allow him to be a teacher (p. 44).

His search continued until almost the end of the summer when it was time to return to his school. Then in a newspaper, he read about twin brothers, Michael and Peter Ball, two monks who were establishing a new monastery whose mission it was to serve young people. Intrigued, Chambers visited the brothers, heard their vision for their Community, and agreed then and there to join them. He quit his teaching job and moved to Stroud, “a small town in rural Gloucestershire where Peter and Michael had found a large deserted house in the middle of the town's public park, which the local council leased...for a popycorn rent” (p. 45). The first priory found its way into Chambers' novels. It serves as the setting for scenes from *NIK: Now I Know* in which Nik visits a monastery in his quest to understand God.

They were an immediate hit in the community. Probably at first a curiosity in their gray robes, they soon became known as tireless workers who helped young people with their problems. Chambers worked both in the Community and as a teacher in a local school. He calls these days the most demanding seven years of his life. The daily schedule went something like:

Up at 5.30 a.m. for ‘the work of God’ in chapel. To school by 8.30. Teach all day, breaking at lunchtime for the midday office said privately. Library and drama work after school. Back home by 6.00 p.m. for chapel. Supper at 7.00 followed by half an hour of ‘Recreation’—a relaxed time for all the monks together... then Compline and an hour of meditation before bed by midnight (Chambers, 1991, p. 45).

But the problem that Chambers described early, the worm in his apple, the desire to write made monastic life impossible for him. His work and his newfound celebrity ran counter to the demands of the monastic life. Chambers had to either give up the Community or give up his writing. He chose to keep the latter. "On the morning of Tuesday 26 September 1967," he writes in *SAAS*, "leaving letters for Peter and Michael, [he] went off to school taking only the files to do with [his] work and a change of clothes" (p. 45). He left behind his other possessions, his books, and his old life.

His life was in for more change, however. A short time later in 1967, he went to visit his publisher in London. While there, he called up Nancy Lockwood, American expatriate, who had invited him to write reviews for *Children's book News*, which she edited. They struck up a conversation that has yet to end. He describes Lockwood as, "[c]leverer than I, funnier, utterly faithful, entirely without pretension, pomposity or sentimentality, with a wearying power to concentrate and see even the worst things through to a satisfactory end, and with an unnerving accuracy of judgement about people, she is the one other person who has never let me down" (Chambers, 1991, p. 46)

On March 30th, 1968, they were married and subsequently moved to the United States, where they stayed at the New Hampshire home of Nancy's parents for six months. During this time, the Chambers read and made their plans. Their future involved one of the many books they read there, Leonard Woolf's autobiography. In it, Woolf described how he had formed Hogarth Press on a shoestring. One of the projects the Chambers longed to start was a periodical devoted to the critical study and advancement of children's literature. In Woolf, they found inspiration and in a moment that can only be

described as a mixture of enthusiasm and naiveté, they decided to form the magazine

Signal:

[A]s if it were a living snapshot...[they]looked at each other and said, 'Let's do it!' [He] remember[s] because even at the time it had the unmistakable breath-grasping quality of the inevitable. Whether [they] succeeded or failed, something was being done because it could not be denied" (p. 47).

They returned to Britain, where they set up shop in Thimble Cottage (from which they took the name "Thimble Press"). The magazine met with success, and they worked various jobs to support themselves. It wasn't long before they needed to move out of Thimble Cottage. After two moves, they settled in South Woodchester, where they still remain. In addition to *Signal*, Thimble Press began publishing groundbreaking critical books on children's literature. With the success of the press, Chambers was able to devote more of his time to his own writing.

CHAPTER IV

The Sextet

Aidan Chambers doesn't think much of his first two novels, *Cycle Smash* (1967) and *Marle* (1968). They are, he says, "an example of how awareness of audience can disrupt an author's vision" (S. D. Gill, personal communication, November 4, 1997). When he wrote these novels, Chambers' vision was simply to write novels that engaged adolescent readers. He accomplished that, of course, but the books left him unfulfilled. When he began *Breaktime*, he also began a new way of writing, as he wrote in *SAAS*, which mirrored the form of the novels themselves:

To help me while I'm preparing the book and all the time I'm writing it I make copious notes in a large notebook.... They include everything—much more than the finished novel: suggestions about plot and characters, extracts from other books, ideas and thoughts, drawings, photographs, letters from friends, clippings from newspapers, trial snatches of dialogue and narrative, grumbles and celebrations, even passages about the view from my window at those frequent times when composing is going badly and my imagination is stodgy—anything that might be useful, might help the work (p. 50).

This new way of writing produced a new kind of novel in *Breaktime*, which Chambers envisioned as part of a sextet of similar novels, all delving into different facets

of the adolescent life. Most of the adolescent literature written by Aidan Chambers has one or more of these characteristics—a intelligent male protagonist who is struggling to define his identity, an equally intelligent love interest (though not always female) and antithesis, and an experimental style best described as “narrative montage.” The next four parts of this chapter will examine Chambers’ sextet using these characteristics as a guidepost. The “sextet” is a sextet in name only. To date, four novels have been completed, another is in press, and the sixth lives in the author’s creative consciousness. Though an incomplete group, these books represent the best of Chambers’ fiction. They are the works of an artist who has tried and succeeded at creating high art. His other books, either the early novels or those created for an intermediate reader, will be examined as a separate group following the treatment of the “sextet.”

Breaktime

“Literature is crap,” proclaims a character in *Breaktime*, and Chambers’ ambitious novel is underway. *Breaktime* is the story of Ditto, a high school boy, smart, witty, lustful, lost, bitter, driven to action. The story begins when Ditto’s friend and rival, Morgan, begins a coffee conversation with the proclamation about the fecal quality of literature. Ditto disagrees, and the argumentative Morgan has a new cause. To convince Ditto that “lit-er-arr-tewer” is an out-moded way of telling stories that could be replaced by film and television, Morgan types out a list of “Charges Against Literature.” In these, he writes that literature is dead, that “literature is, by definition, a lie,” that fiction makes

life neat when, in fact, it isn't, that it is a game, and that literature is indeed crap, because it is a sham.

Ditto doesn't immediately answer these charges. Instead, he goes home, where his ill father awaits him. Ditto's father is suffering from a lingering illness, and his long convalescence has changed his personality to taciturn and his relationship with his son into a constant squabble that tears the small family of Ditto, dad, and mom apart. Ditto finds a special letter in the mail, a letter from Helen, a former classmate who has moved out of town but wants to renew a friendship with Ditto. In her letter, she sends along a provocative photograph so he "won't forget what [she] looks like." Later at dinner, still thinking about Helen and about Morgan's Charges, Ditto allows his father to bait him into an argument. Insults fly between the two, until Ditto gets begins to laugh at the situation. This upsets the father so much that he has a heart attack and is rushed to the hospital.

Ditto's father survives the attack, but Ditto, overcome with guilt for having caused it and frustration with having to live in such a stifling atmosphere, decides on a course of action that will satisfy both of the most pressing concerns of his life. Morgan claims that Ditto knows only what he reads in books (Ditto's father later says the same thing using different terms), so Ditto decides that he will spend the upcoming holiday exploring life--and writing about his adventures. He will go camping and will invite the lonely Helen to join him for the trip.

It is a simple matter to get his parents' permission. His mother consents easily, undoubtedly because she sees his need to get away from the tension, which will allow her a break from refereeing the battles between her husband and son. Ditto's father is more

reluctant, him being in the hospital and not wanting to see his wife alone at home. Finally, after Ditto reassures him, he consents. When he was younger, Ditto was close to his father, but over the years, the relationship has gone from strained to open warfare. Several factors led to the disintegration of their relationship, not the least of which was his father's failing health. A virtual invalid, Ditto's father is bitter about life. This bitterness is transferred to his son. But his health only keeps from hiding some of his doubts about his son. Ditto's father feels insecure around his son because of Ditto's education. Ditto believes the insecurity may have started when his father gave him the gift of a book, but Ditto rejected it as unworthy of reading (because it was not one his English teachers approved of).

The novel is really the story of Ditto's re-discovering the relationships in his life. He thinks of his father in one light, but at the end of the story after losing his virginity, Ditto returns to home and finds a note. His father gives him the medals he won motorcycle racing. Ditto realizes that his father values medals very much, though he has never told Ditto about them. When he sees his father in a new light, he is able to forgive him. Ditto is an intellectual from an anti-intellectual family. He argues semantics with his best friend, Morgan. His dialogue is witty, even cutting. Helen says that some don't think Ditto is very bright, but he shows through his repartee with her—she is no slouch at witticism, either—that he is capable of more than those people suspected. His favorite class is English, and he devours the literature that his favorite teacher, Midge, presents. In his actions, however, he shows a propensity for naiveté. He thinks he can create fiction simply by living it.

Ditto begins his journey, but the reader learns about it as Ditto writes it, not in a traditional third person narrative. Instead of a novel about Ditto, *Breaktime* now becomes the novel which Ditto is writing for Morgan. He begins by laying out the scenery, the setting, and the main character's motivation. His first significant journey is to a castle where he by chance meets Jacky, a gay teenager in search of his friend, Robbie. Ditto and Jack strike up a conversation, until Robbie shows up. He invites both Jacky and Ditto into a pub. Ditto drinks far more than he is used to and ends up drunk. In this state he arranges to meet the two men later in the evening for some "fun."

In the meantime, Helen shows up early, taking Ditto by surprise. He is still reeling from the drinking, and his loose tongue starts an argument that ends with Helen leaving town, uncertain whether to return. That night, Ditto and new friends crash a socialist meeting, which happens to be lead by Robbie's father (a fact unknown to Ditto). Robbie shouts charges against his father, and as a result, all three are kicked out. To get back at his father, Robbie tricks Ditto into helping him break into the house of the "socialist leader." They are caught red-handed by the owner, who, of course, is Robbie's father. Still half-drunk, embarrassed, confused, Ditto finds himself booted out, and decides that Robbie had just used him to get back at his father. Jacky agrees, saying "we all use somebody for something," and asks Ditto in what way he was using the pair. Ditto can't answer, though he knows it's all for so-called experience.

Next day, after an apologetic phone call from Ditto, Helen agrees to meet him in a tent where Ditto arranges for a picnic and seclusion. She never had a close relationship with Ditto, but she agrees to meet him for a sexual experience. Helen makes the

encounter on her own terms. She tells Ditto that she enjoys sex, enjoys aggravating her parents, and doesn't care that her reputation is soiled. She is the most actualized character in the novel, making decisions not on intellect like Morgan, not on reactions like Ditto, but on her own desires. When she makes love to Ditto, she not only takes his virginity, she shows him the value of not muddying a relationship by making it more than it is. He awakes the next morning, his mission done, and decides it's time to go home, physically and emotionally.

Back home, his father's health has improved, and he finds it easier to talk to his mother. She gives him a note from his father, who is still in the hospital. In it, he acknowledges that he bears part of the responsibility for their falling out and hopes that he and Ditto can begin to see each other's side of the story. After reading the note, Ditto packs away the letter from Helen and Morgan's list of charges, setting aside his previous life, baring the slate for a new beginning.

Morgan plays a small but important role in the novel. As Ditto's argumentative friend, he inspires him to pursue the truth of fiction by experiencing it. It is a weak premise for a rite of passage novel, but Morgan is so disarming in his logic that the premise is plausible. Morgan's other role allows the novel to close with a nice twist. He realizes that Ditto has made him a character in a novel and that we're all, as Shakespeare would say, "poor players who dance and strut their hour upon the stage."

The novel ends with Morgan critiquing Ditto's story. He is not wholly satisfied that Ditto has created fiction because he has merely related his escapades over *Breaktime*. Ditto argues that he has indeed created fiction, that he could have spent the week making

the story up. "Are you saying," Morgan asks, "I'm just a character in a story?" Ditto replies, "Aren't we all?"

This twist ending, which makes the reader doubt the validity of fiction in the same way that Morgan had, drew attention from critics. Reviewer Margery Fisher (1978) in *Growing Point* points out that:

Breaktime is a significant title in more than one way. It indicates the strictly defined period of time of Ditto's break from normality...Aidan Chambers is far from dogmatic in his experiment. Morgan's comment after reading Ditto's document, 'Are you saying I'm just a character in a story' leaves us in the air. But whether Ditto has described a real event or an imaginary one... a particular moment of truth: has been reached by and for the boy. With humour and wit, with ingenuity and candour, the author has offered one piece of one kind of truth in a spin of technical and emotional investigation (p. 3418).

The truth about fiction is a question Chambers has pondered since childhood, when books and movies were among his only entertainment. It is his stated goal that his fiction will be a written movie in people's hands. Thus it is no surprise then that his ambitious novel *Breaktime* is as much a typographical representation of film as it is what we think of as a novel. In *Breaktime*, Chambers uses several film techniques including split screens, dual dialogue, narrative presented alongside a section from child psychologist Dr. Spock's book on teen sexuality, dialogue without narrative, hand writing samples, and visuals such as word balloons, drawings, and maps.

Breaktime represents a change in writing direction for Chambers, one in which he chose to break from traditional narrative form. The direction changed not only his approach to writing but the shape of his prose as well, which worried Chambers that the novel would not find an audience, or even a publisher. But it was published to mixed reviews. Some enjoyed the stylistic chances he took, but others, such as Richard Yates (1979) of the *New York Times Book Review* writes that the devices were "close to swamping the novel...[w]henver he puts them aside he writes well" (p. 30). Most of Yates' ire was directed at the passages where Chambers used a split-screen technique (this was popular in film in the forties and fifties, when Chambers would have been most of his film viewing). The visual technique, however, is only of several techniques he uses in *Breaktime*, including manipulating text, sounds, and visuals.

In general, Chambers manipulates text in three different ways. The first way is to excerpt passages from other books. At Richmond, where Ditto stops to do his camping, Chambers inserts a description of the countryside, written as if from a travelogue. The focal point of the town, a twelfth century castle, is described in a kind of lush detail that would have been inappropriate for Ditto's narration. The travelogue description breaks the action and by contrast, makes the reader more aware of Ditto's consciousness. The climactic scene of the novel takes place at an out of the way place called Whitcliffe Scar. Through a passage from a book, we learn how Whitcliffe's horse carried him over the cliff. Whitcliffe survived with only a broken leg. Without the passage, there is no way the reader could know about the history of the Scar. Without the history, the reader would have no way of connecting Whitcliffe's fall with the leap that Ditto is taking from

the precipice of his life. Ditto survives his fall, too. Ditto, tongue-in-cheek, remarks that "Willance's Leap on Whitcliffe Scar was to be {his} riding place too."

The second kind of graphic is found in ordinary places. On the bus to Richmond, there is a placard that warns riders, "DO NOT STAND ON PLATFORM WHILE BUS IN MOTION." One rider ignores the rule, though she knows accidents have happened and will happen again. Ditto ignores rules, too, knowing their consequences. At Whitcliffe's scar, there is a gravestone inscribed with words honoring the dead horse of Robert Willance. The horse carried Willance over the edge of the Scar, killing himself, breaking his master's leg, but Willance was able to slit the horse's belly open and keep warm in his entrails until help arrived. Willance honored the thing that hurt him. Ditto does that, too. So does everyone.

The third kind of text effects is graffiti, handwriting, and typography. Ditto finds graffiti in the pub where he meets Jacky and Robbie: "FAR AWAY IS NEAR AT HAND IN IMAGES OF ELSEWHERE." It sounds like the nonsense rhymes of Alice talking to the Mad Hatter. It has meaning for Ditto, though. Ditto writes the next bit of graffiti. After insulting Helen at their first aborted meeting, Ditto chases her to the bus. Unable to catch it, he scrawls on the outside of Helen's window the word, "HELP." This surprises both him and Helen. In his mind he has come looking for sex, but in that moment of panic, he realizes that he is seeking help. He keeps looking for help until he finds it in himself.

Along with graffiti, Chambers uses two types of typographic effects, handwriting and typewriting. Ditto's quest to find something worth writing about begins when

Morgan types up his Charges. Rather than list the charges in the standard font, Chambers presents the Charges as they would look if typed on a typewriter. This technique gives the reader the sensation that the list is truer than if it were part of the regular text. When Ditto answers Morgan's questions, his answer is typed, too. Again, Chambers lets us see the page as is. The typeface is different from the one used in Morgan's letter. This increases the feeling of authenticity. The other typographic effect is Chamber's use of handwritten notes. Like the typed pages, the actual notes are seen. Helen's letter to Ditto that gives him the idea to go camping is shown on page 18. One can tell from her handwriting, looping, bolded, with circles instead of dots over the 'i's" that she is a free spirit.

In the second letter, which she wrote after their lovemaking, the manuscript is calmer, less bold. So is Helen. By seeing the letters, we get a clear mental picture of the kind of person Helen is. The same is true of the note his father writes Ditto at the end of the novel. Unlike Helen, Ditto's father writes in an orderly fashion, the letters even, the lines straight. He crosses his T's and dots his I's. Ditto, we can tell, though we never see his handwriting, is much like his father.

Chambers started watching movies at a time when a technique called split screens was in vogue. In this technique, the screen was split between two actors: both talking on the telephone, for example, or both entering a room in completely different buildings. Chambers brings this film technique to his novels by splitting pages between two different elements. In the love scene, Ditto's inner monologue is on the left side of the page and on the right is an excerpt for Dr. Spock's book on teen sexuality. As Ditto

describes the physically and intellectual stages he experiences during the sex act, Dr. Spock analytically advocates the need for adolescents to explore their sexuality. Ditto finishes by turning off the intellectual voice in his head, while his body succumbs to orgasm. Comically, Spock prattles on, long after Ditto's narrative has ceased.

Another split screen is used when Ditto is about to be tossed out of the Socialist's meeting. He is drunk. This is a lot of noises, especially the noise of the Socialists yelling for Ditto and his friend to get out. The page splits into three columns. On the left is a list of words Ditto associates with "out." On the right is a list of rhymes Ditto makes, playfully, even as he's about to be attacked. In the center is the narrative of how Ditto feels, drunk, disorderly, unable to control himself without effort.

Chambers is able to show the multi-layers of consciousness that Ditto struggles with. This struggle is repeated by other split screens. Critic Marilyn Kaye (1979) has this to say about *Breaktime*'s style:

[*Breaktime* is] a complex story, told in a complex, and occasionally confusing manner. Switching back and forth from first to third person narrative, frequently making use of a stream of consciousness style, and combining various literary and graphic modes, Chambers tries to present Ditto's story in a way that will reflect the disorder in his mind. It's an intriguing endeavor, and sometimes it's quite effective...(p.71)

Chambers uses sound effects in a few places. When Ditto, Robbie, and Jack are caught red-handed in Robbie's House, Chambers uses sounds such as POW and zap to show how the realization comes over Ditto. Another place where sound effects are used

is in the meeting hall where the Socialists are listening to Robbie's father. Their shouts are circled in word balloons, a mix between sound effects and the story board concept Chambers uses elsewhere. These sound effects give a comic book like feel to the passages where Ditto is too drunk to reason well. He cannot see or reason well enough to escape the danger he has gotten himself into. The world becomes like a drawing or a comic book through his eyes. By using sound effects, Chambers clues the reader into Ditto's inner most thoughts, ones Ditto is too incoherent to realize.

The one cinematic technique that Chambers uses again and again is the fictional equivalent of a voice over. And in most instances when Ditto is talking with his mother, either in person or on the telephone, the dialogue is represented only as one line in plain text and another line, denoting another speaker, in italics. This technique amounts to a voice over, where a scene continues visually with only the dialogue being heard over the visuals. By presenting the dialogue in a voice over format, Chambers narrows down the relationship between Ditto and his mother. She exists to be a mediator between him and his father. She is described in only sketchy terms and is seldom referred to in his flash back memories. The voice over technique is used sparingly when Chambers is relating a conversation between Ditto and his father. Most of their conversations are face-to-face, and when Ditto is remembering important events in his life, it is his father he describes as being important to those events. The voice over technique is also used in a few instances when Ditto is talking to Helen over the phone. This is reminiscent of the technique of continuing a scene, or showing only one speaker with the voice coming from the telephone.

Chambers creates a sense of a narrator by including footnotes in Ditto's story. The first footnote is an explanation of how he came up with the idea for his story and what story he is copying. The other important footnote explains a side story about a girl molesting a boy in an undertaker shop, near the coffins. Both of these examples show how intrusive the narrator can be in this story. Despite the intrusive narrator, the footnotes give another level of consciousness to the novel. Here we have a story of Ditto writing a story that we are reading and in it, Ditto is making footnotes to the story that he is writing. If not for Chambers, *Breaktime* would have turned into a jumbled mess. Instead, it is a treatise in the multi-faceted way that fiction can work. According to Eugene Sullivan (1979), however, *Breaktime* remained a mess. He describes *Breaktime* as a "rather trite and shallow novel, stereotyping today's youth and lacking the perception and depth hearkened to above" (p. 228).

Nowhere else are Chambers' cinematic techniques as apparent as in the scenes where he sets up the chapters the way a group of writers creates a story board for a film. Some writers refer to this as scaffolding. Instead of removing the scaffolding, Chambers leaves it in, making the reader aware of it. The first example occurs when Chambers offers a summary of events that have happened in the novel up to that point. This is the same way a storyboard would be laid out for a film. Following this, Chambers shows the reader a character sketch of Ditto. This is another piece of scaffolding that most writers would remove before writing the scene. In this character sketch, Chambers writes about the characteristics of Ditto, even those that haven't been seen yet, and are never truly seen in the novel. In Ditto's story, Chambers uses descriptive text to set up the action of the

chapters. This is like the tags from a shooting script, where the elements of the scene are presented before the dialogue and action begin. Visually, Chambers uses cartoons and a blank page of gray to describe the events in the chapter where Ditto is attacked by the Socialists. In this case, a picture is truly worth a thousand words, especially since the narrator is too incoherent to provide the words for the reader.

Truth in all its various forms is what Chambers hoped to reveal in *Breaktime*. From the first day of writing *Breaktime*, he reveals in *SAAS*, "I promised myself only to write that for which I could find a reference point for truth. I mean that whatever I write I will always have some experiential way of knowing that it is so, that it is "true"" (p. 55).

Dance on My Grave

Chambers' 1982 novel is subtitled,

*A Life and a Death in Four Parts
One Hundred and Seventeen Bits
Six Running Reports
and Two Press Clippings
with a few jokes/a puzzle or three
some footnotes
and a fiasco now and then
to help the story along.*

True to its word, *Dance on My Grave* mixes elements of different styles; changes points of view; and incorporates reports, scenes, clippings, and footnotes to form one fine novel. Taking a look at the structure of *Dance on My Grave* is like putting together a

montage from clippings tore from magazine pages. As Margery Fisher (1983) in *Growing Point* writes:

This is a serious book, not just the study of a single experience but an attempt to define personality, to encapsulate a stage in growing up, even is an undictatorial, non-dictatorial way to make a statement of philosophy. It...makes its point through raucous humour and implied feeling..." (p. 3928).

Dance on My Grave is a novel that defies a single description, and critics have argued its merits. The novel is a stylistic gem, but moreover, it explores the relationship between two males. Chambers raised a few eyebrows with *Dance* because of its sensitive treatment of homosexual love, a subject that has landed him squarely in the battle over censorship in America. *Dance on My Grave* treats the idea of sexuality with frankness, but none have accused it of proselytizing. According to Chambers, *Dance* "is largely to do with emotions--kinds of love and our personal obsessions" (Hipple, 1997, p. 225).

In his essay, *Coming of Age and Coming Out: Representations of Gays and Lesbians in Young Adult Literature*, Rob Linné (1996) wrestles with the issue of gay literature in the Young Adult field. He claims that most gays learn about their sexuality through American pop culture rather than through serious literature, although, he says, "American pop culture is an insubstantial guide for a teen working through adolescence while juggling issues of the closet, fears of gay bashings, and questions about intercourse in a dangerous age" (p. 71). In spite of attempts at silencing gay voices, "librarians have understood the role literature" has in helping adolescents "curious about their

sexualities...begin their search for self-understanding by perusing... texts that offer some clues (p. 73). Many homosexuals remember well the "first time they surreptitiously looked up 'homosexual' in an encyclopedia or health textbook or the first time they sneaked a peek at an adult magazine" (p. 73).

To fill this void, Linne says, "quality fiction and non-fiction can shade in the outline of what 'gay' means and help the young reader [find] reliable knowledge and positive images. Librarians and teachers who keep such literature readily available and openly displayed offer their students a safe place to explore their sexualities" (p. 77). In his non-fiction work, *Introducing Books to Children* (1983), Chambers says that reading literature "helps a child's personal growth—you discover yourself in literature and therefore learn to understand more about yourself" (p. 12). In essence, that is what *Dance on My Grave*, despite its innovative style and controversial subject matter, is about: a child trying to learn more about himself.

The novel begins with a newspaper story about Hal Robinson, who is arrested for dancing on the fresh grave of his lover, Barry Gorman. The narrative begins when Hal retells the story of his seven weeks with Barry. This is done in the form of a report to a social worker assigned to his case after the arrest. Hal begins by telling about how confusing his life is. He and his family have only recently moved to an area of England called Southend, a resort on the Thames. Hal is a good student, good enough for his English teacher, Jim Osburn, to recommend he continue his studies into Sixth Year. Hal's father disagrees, wanting him to get a job. To clear his head, Hal takes to the Thames in a sloop borrowed from a friend, Spike. Hal is no sailor, and in a short amount

of time, he capsizes. His rescuer turns out to be Barry, who we learn later makes rescuing lost souls his hobby.

Barry tows Hal and the sloop to shore and takes Hal to his house, where Mrs. Gorman arranges a hot bath and meal. Unable to stop Mrs. Gorman from taking him in hand, Hal enjoys the bath and later joins Barry for a meal. It is obvious to both of them that they feel a mutual attraction. Their conversation is peppered with innuendo as they feel each other out. Turns out, both Hal and Barry went to the same school and had the same English teacher, Mr. Osburn. Drawn by Barry's personality, Hal takes a job at the Gorman's record shop, hangs out at the Gorman house, and becomes Barry's lover. This time for Hal is marked by extremes in emotion. He lives and breathes Barry, showing a deep obsession that leads him into a confused state. He is intoxicated by his newfound love. Part of Hal's confusion, we learn, is his attempt to establish a sexual identity. He has a history of being the passive partner in his relationships.

Later, Barry coerces Hal into making a pact: if one of them is to die, then the other will dance on the deceased's grave. Over the next seven weeks, Hal's obsession with Barry grows: he moves in with the Gormans and lives his life at Barry's whim. He becomes a parasite in Barry's life. At the shop he mopes when Barry isn't there, but his face lights up when he comes into the room. His parents grow concerned about his lifestyle. Though they don't talk about it, they realize he is gay and worry about his late nights and long periods of absence from the house. Hal's father, intent on him quitting school and getting honest work, doesn't understand his son's inability to make a decision

about his life. His mother tries to be the intermediary between them but doesn't hide the fact that she would like to see Hal go on to university.

It all comes to a sorry end when Barry, bored of Hal, has a one-night stand with Kari, a Norwegian girl they meet on the beach. Jealous, Hal confronts Barry, and their argument ends with Hal sacking the office in the back of the record store and stomping out. An hour later, Barry crashes his motorcycle and dies. Grief-stricken, Hal tries to find out what happened from Mrs. Gorman, who blames him for her son's death. She is offended by his suggestion of viewing the body and refuses to tell him when the funeral is. Hal, with the help of Kari, sees Barry's body in the morgue. After the funeral, Hal sneaks into the Jewish section of the graveyard and tries to dance on Barry's grave. He succumbs to anger and grief and attacks the grave, digging it up, and when he does decide to dance, he falls into the neighboring grave, upsetting the headstone. Despite this failure, he returns the next night and is arrested by an alerted policeman. All of this unravels through Hal's account of the story and through the notes of the social worker who persuades him to tell his story to the court so that it would go easy on him. After finishing the story, which helps him define his identity, he starts a new relationship with Spike, the boy whose sloop he overturned to start the adventure. The novel ends with another clipping, informing the reader that Hal has received probation.

The narrative is driven by two different voices and in two different formats. The events of the story before the graveyard dance are told by Hal. He switches between a first person narrative, the most commonly used, to a third person account, which he switches to when the story becomes too intense or when he feels too close to it. He writes

the account of his time with Barry because the social worker insists that he does. The story, then, is largely made up by his "re-creating the events of the summer in a vivid...account capturing the breathlessness of adolescent love"(*Junior Bookshelf*, 1982, p. 235). In writing it, however, he reaches a catharsis about his obsession with Barry, as he "tries to express himself, fails and tries again" (p. 235). Alternating with this running account is the professional notebook of the social worker assigned to Hal's case. These are told in first person, using the clinical bureaucratic language. This form of prose keeps the reader from learning much about the social worker, except that she genuinely cares for Hal and wants it to work out for him. Structurally, her disaffected voice provides another perspective about Hal and his family, revealing information in ways that Hal would not be capable of. For example, we learn far more about the teacher, Jim Osburn, through her interview with him than would be possible through Hal's "deep and anguished feelings"(Sutherland, 1983, p. 185).

An interesting technique that Chambers uses is one common to the mystery genre. *Dance* opens with a clipping from the local newspaper. In it, we learn that Hal is arrested for dancing on Barry's grave. Before we meet Hal, we know what he did: before we meet Barry, we know he is dead. Conventional literary wisdom says that giving away the story is a fatal error. But Chambers takes a passage out Forsythe's *Day of the Jackal*. In it, an assassin is assigned to assassinate French president Charles De Gaul. We know from the beginning that the assassin cannot succeed, but Forsythe is such a skilled writer that the reader charges through the novel to find out HOW he failed. Chambers shows that skill in *Dance on My Grave*. Though we know that Hal dances on a grave, we want to know

why. Even though Barry is doomed to a quick death, we from the moment we meet him, want to know how he will die and what will happen between the two boys to cause such an outlandish act to be taken.

Another genre technique Chambers uses is the cliffhanger. In several scenes involving Hal, he finishes the scene without showing its resolution, cutting to the social workers' report. This increases the tension, which drives the reader deeper into the story. This technique was not evident in his earlier novels. *Breaktime*, for example, was more of a picaresque plot, surviving more on the strength of the narrative than on the structure of the plot. In *Dance on My Grave*, the experimental elements are less obvious than in other books. The linguistic tricks so evident in *Breaktime* are subservient to the development of Hal's character. Some critics, however, do not agree, finding that "Chambers' style is often staccato, often introspective; this is not an easy book to read" (Sutherland, 1983, p. 185). A reviewer from *The Junior Bookshelf* writes that "[t]he story line is thin, and everything depends on ...skill in narrative...a small story is stretched out to intolerable lengths in the process. The writer's skill has not...helped him on this occasion" (p.235). Even Margery Fisher (1983), who generally praises the novel, writes that *Dance on My Grave* "could have seemed artificial" if not for "a personal voice...expressing with special clarity the way adolescent boys can in moments of extreme emotion switch to a disconcertingly matter-of-fact detachment" (p. 3928).

As in the other three novels in this chapter, *Dance on My Grave* is concerned with one central theme, what Chambers calls, in this case, obsession. Hal's obsessive qualities are clearly evident, even before he meets Barry. He has had a succession of obsessive

friendships, beginning with his first friend. His second friendship doesn't end up much better. He and the boy are content to hang out and read. His third encounter turns out to be his first sexual experience. It is in this relationship that he realizes that he is gay. The other boy says, "I wish you were a girl," but Hal has no such wish. In each of these relationships, Hal is the passive partner, yet he grows bored with each of them. Obsessions work in such a way. There is a short period of exhilaration, followed by an equally intense period of disenchantment. In his relationship with Barry, Hal's disenchantment has yet to intensify before the relationship ends. Ironically, Barry has the same obsessive qualities. He enjoys the newness of a person, relishes finding them out. Like Hal, he yearns for those short, exhilarating moments. His life is structured around finding them, and he has the charm and looks to quickly gain what he wants. Unlike Hal, he does not let a relationship fade. Instead, he ends it abruptly, and in Hal's case, savagely.

Hal is the more passive of the two, "a boy in whom coarseness and sensitive feelings are at war" (Fisher, 1983, p. 3928). He is physically smaller, his physique more feminine. He has little body and facial hair, and as he admits to the Norwegian girl, Kari, he has never shaved. He is thin, and before moving to the resort town of Southend, his skin was so white, other teenagers called him "bleach man." In relationships, he is the giver. He follows his "bosom pals around, doing what they insist. His brief sexual experiences have followed the same pattern. He allows other boys to approach him, and they are the aggressors in the relationship. At school, he is "intelligent, witty, self-

deprecating, and somewhat innocent” (Maguire, 1983, p. 308). His favorite teacher, Jim Osburn, essentially selects his future career by suggesting he take Sixth year in his class.

In personal relationships, Hal is always passive. When he meets Barry, his is still searching for an identity. Barry’s *joie de vivre* attracts him, and his obsession allows Barry to dictate all aspects of his life: he decides how to dress, what to eat, and where to go on Barry’s whim. At first, this is exhilarating for Barry, but in time, he begins seeking out other lovers. “You bore me!” he tells Hal when Hal becomes too jealous. After Barry’s death, Hal goes into a deep funk, a funk from which he emerges by writing the details of their affair in order to clear his “muddled head” (*Junior Bookshelf*, 1983, p. 235). Hal begins the novel as a co-dependent soul; he ends it as someone who recognizes his flaws and is able to “convey the emotional upheaval...after Barry’s death” (Maguire, 1983, p.308).

One critic wrote that “the central conflict hinges not on the lovers being gay, but on their having two idiosyncratic and contradictory personalities” (Maguire, 1983, p. 308). Barry, more than Hal, is a contradiction. On the surface, he seems carefree, daring. He picks up strangers out of the gutter and brings them home, he sails his boat on the Thames with reckless skill, and he breaks the speed limit with his motorcycle as a matter of pride. In one particular incident, he convinces an angry biker gang that his is foreign so that they will let him and Hal ride with them by turning the top row of the keyboard into a different language.

When he is bored of Hal, he spends the night with a girl named Kari, an act that enrages Hal. He seems to care for others’ feelings, but he has no compunction about

hurting those feelings when his mood changes. His break up with Hal is especially messy because of the way he handles it. On the flip side, Barry is the epitome of responsibility. After his father dies, leaving his mother to run the record store, Barry realizes that she can't do it alone. He quits school, over the protests of teacher Jim Osburn, to take over running the record shop. He works almost every day to support his mother, who worries over him like a whirling dervish. It is this dichotomy that both attracts and infuriates Hal. Barry seems to have a sense of his own mortality, thus his coercing Hal into the promise to dance on his grave. In the end, it is this same chemistry that gets him killed.

One reviewer is particularly judgmental in his sweeping assessment of *Dance on My Grave*, wishing "that Mr. Chambers had found a theme more worthy of his deep understanding and his literary skills (*Junior Bookshelf*, 1983, p. 235). Others wrote that the novel features "effective communication of deep and often anguished feelings, the perceptive depiction of relationships, and the depth and consistency of characterization" (Sutherland, 1983, p. 185). Margery Fischer (1983), however, sums up *Dance on My Grave* with this pronouncement: "If teenage novels are to justify their existence, it will be this kind of honest, particularized, personal writing" (p. 3928).

Dance on My Grave took over a decade to write, a long time span, even for the meticulous Chambers: "I have always found it a struggle to author books that matter to me" (Chambers, 1991, p. 53). His writing concentrates on language, the "god who makes us" (p. 53), so it is little wonder that a novel takes him years of fine-tuning and tweaking to complete. The stylistic challenges that faced him in *Dance on My Grave* make his writing task as complex as the novel. It is always a struggle for him to create art as

powerful as the art he envisions in his mind's eye. As he says about his work, he can't "think of [himself] as successful and won't until [he has] written a book that satisfies...by matching in its objectified printed form the rich density of the imagined original" (p. 54). And despite his successes, he finds reasons to feel insecure about his writing: "In this respect, nothing has changed since [he] was fifteen [he is] also just as unsure...and as sure of failure [and still finds] reading both the best of pleasure and the best means of keeping some grip on life" (Chambers, 1991, p. 55).

Hal would agree.

NIK: Now I Know

Published as *Now I Know* in England, this philosophical novel is told alternately through straight narration, a transcript from an audio tape, a film shooting script, and the notebook of Nik, an atheist who agrees to produce a youth group's pageant about the return of Christ to Earth. Nik meets Julie, who has strong--if unconventional--beliefs about religion, and they enter into long conversations and bouts of soul searching about life, religion, and other "stuff."

NIK: Now I Know has three simultaneous plots. It is a novel about faith, belief, and religion told through a variety of media. The first plot is about Nik, an atheist student who in order to graduate from school, becomes a researcher for a student film project, the subject of which is the second coming of Christ. Nik meets with a production crew throughout the novel, a crew that is struggling about how to portray Christ if he were

resurrected today. As an atheist, he is at odds with the other students, most of whom have their own ideas about how Christ and the resurrection should be portrayed. Nik undertakes the role of researcher in order to learn what Christ and religion are about. As an official doubter, he is unable to understand their belief in God and the power of their faith.

The exploration of Christian dogma is not a common theme in Young Adult literature, where many authors strive to avoid conventionally adult themes. "The bildungsroman of faith," writes Roger Sutton in *Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books*, "is a rare thing in YA fiction, and Nik's journey, attended by devils and saints, is thought-provoking, articulating questions considered but not asked by many teens" (p. 85). Barbara Hutchinson in *School Library Journal* writes that "[t]he language is contemporary and ranges from religious reflections to adolescent vulgarity, from an excruciatingly graphic description of the standard method of crucifixion to a hilarious anecdote about uncontrollable laughing in church" (p. 38).

Nik is something of a burnt out case, or more accurately, a case that has never caught fire. He is aloof and distant from his schoolmates, so much so that he has the reputation of being cool. To his dismay and delight, students emulate his behavior by affecting a Nik-like air. He meets Julie when he goes out to film a peace rally by a group of Christians. This is part of the research he is doing for the play. At the rally Nik spots a woman in the crowd. She has curly black hair, wears an army jacket, and although not particularly beautiful, she has an aura about her that immediately catches and keeps Nik's

attention. During the rally rain begins to fall, making the field where they are a potential mud hole.

Throughout the novel he continues his research, finding out information about what the world was like when Christ was born. He hopes to create the historical Jesus Christ, but he finds that Christ cannot be defined by historical fact alone. His story is told through a succession of journal entries and flashbacks. Roger Sutton (1987) in the *Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books* points out that "As in his *Breaktime* and *Dance on My Grave*, Chambers here uses a variety of devices--diary entries, letters, lists, 'intercuts' and illustrations--along with (almost) straightforward narration that readers may have trouble keeping track of" (p. 72).

Julie tells her story from a hospital bed by dictating letters to Nik through a nurse. She is an invalid bandaged from head to toe suffering from injuries from a bomb attack. In her dictated letters she talks to Nik about faith in God and how one can come to believe. She also writes about their love affair, started after a protest rally where she mistook Nik for a neo-Nazi. After the rally she and Nik became close, though their lives were different. She is a working girl who spends her time in a shop and devotes the rest of her time to be coming closer to God. She takes church and her life seriously. She is the antithesis of Nik who is an intellectual who sees her devotion to religion as absurd, but he adores the fact that she can believe so fundamentally in something she cannot see. He needs proof, she needs not to need proof.

They are the stereotypical odd couple. It is her compassion for other human beings that gets her into trouble. She is injured in a bomb blast not directly but by going

to help a man injured in the blast when no one else will. In fact the injured man is the bomber, and the reason no one else will help him is they are afraid that he has booby-trapped himself. When Julie goes to see him, he does explode killing himself and injuring her. She ends up in a burn unit, her eyes blinded by the trauma of the explosion, her body covered with burns. Only Nik can communicate with her until she improves.

Some critics took issue with Chambers' characterization of Nik and Julie, however. Though Sutton (1987) enjoyed parts of *NIK: Now I Know*, he thinks that "...the form and style are hampered by a self-conscious cleverness that impedes the subject, and while we hear plenty--too much--of Nik's religious quandaries and epiphanies, there is barely enough story or characterization to support the theme" (p. 72).

The third plot actually starts the novel in the opening chapter. It is early morning, the sun just rising, and a jogger passes by the town dump. As he is running, he sees a flash of light and looking up, spots a boy hanging upside down on a cross suspended from a crane. At first the jogger thinks he is mad, but another look proves that there is indeed a young man on a cross apparently crucifying himself. He runs to the police as quickly as possible, but when they return the young man is gone. There is enough evidence, however to support the man's story: Broken glasses on the ground and a crucifix left behind. A police detective, Thomas Thrupp, pursues the case with gusto. Thrupp, a young detective with a nose for regulations, performed the same role as the social worker did in *Breaktime*—to give an adult perspective on the actions of young people. Thrupp is not as sympathetic, however, as his attitude about the mysterious Christ figure shows. By questioning his sources around town, he learns that a young man did indeed hang himself

upside down from the crane. Throughout the rest of the novel he searches for Nik, the young man in question, hoping to find out why he would do such a thing.

After she is well enough to see Nik, Julie removes the bandages and though she is scarred, Nik loves her because it was her inner beauty that he adored most. Julie has during her time in the hospital bed realized that she needs to devote her body and soul to knowing God better. In its tearful breakup she and Nik go their separate ways. Distraught, Nik wanders through out the night and coming upon the crane in the junkyard, rigs a makeshift cross then hangs himself from it. In the early morning dawn he comes to realize the acts of sacrifice and climbs down from the cross. Nik ends the novel with a summary of the research he has done and gives suggestions to the film group about how Jesus Christ should be portrayed. Among his suggestions are: 1) that Christ be a woman; 2) that the film should be a montage of everyday life; 3) that they fire the director (who, Nik concludes, wants to be God).

In many ways, this is Chambers' most personal novel. The arguments espoused by both Nik and Julie to argue the existence or non existence of Christ are in essence the same arguments that Aidan had as a young college student with his the devoutly Christian friends, a time in his life he describes in *SAAS*: "[He] read and read, argued through the night, got into politics, quickly discovered what a lying and corrupting business that is and got out" (p. 52).

His discussions of faith and belief were similar to those that he encountered when he first began looking at a monastery as a way of testing his belief in Christ. Like Nik, Chambers is an extremist. When he chose to pursue Christianity as a lifestyle, he

intentionally chose a monastery as the most extreme manifestation of faith. How better to test his own faith than to completely immerse himself in the service of God? That is the same course that Julie chooses for herself in the novel, to completely immerse herself in Christ, to leave the material world behind them to come as close as possible to the spiritual world. Like Chambers' other novels, *NIK: Now I Know* features complex characters asking complex questions. These young people struggle with the meaning of their lives.

This struggle was apparent to critics such as Barbara Hutchinson (1987), who writes that:

NIK is a profoundly and seriously Christian book, thought-provoking and memorable. It is also guaranteed to wrench Christian readers right out of their comfortable pews and make them rethink what it means to be a Christian...[c]haracters and setting too are drawn with cinematic clarity, but there is no superficial movie resolution here. An unusual novel, not for every taste, but well worth recommending to mature teen readers who are ready for a challenge (p. 38).

Margaret Fischer (1987) in *Growing Point* echoes the sentiment when she writes that "This is...[a]n honest attempt to engage the reader totally; in my view it is essential reading for anyone from fifteen or so who takes fiction seriously" (p. 3365).

This attention to the spiritual aspects of the novel must have pleased Chambers, for he writes that *NIK: Now I Know* is "largely about what people often call spiritual experience and about thought, and how they clash and blend and complement each other"

(Hipple, 1997, p. 225). In the novel, thought and spirituality, personified in the main characters, do indeed clash and blend and complement each other, the way that Julie and Nik do, but in the end each has to find its own reason for being.

The Toll Bridge

“Adam comes at me like a ghost,” is the first line of *The Toll Bridge*. This intriguing sentence introduces the novel’s catalyst character and sets the tone for the story that follows. The ghost-like quality of Adam and the way that Piers, the protagonist, is alternately spooked and fascinated by him is the gist of the story. *The Toll Bridge* is a more traditional narrative than the other novels in the sextet, but it is still more challenging than the best of American YA writing. The novel borrows its motif from the Greek myth of Janus, the keeper of the gate to Hades who has two faces. Symbolically, the protagonist, Piers has two faces as well. To escape the pressures of school, parents, and a co-dependent girlfriend, Piers takes a job as a gatekeeper of a private toll bridge. He lives alone in the gatehouse until the mysterious Adam shows up one night and intrudes into his life. Piers wants rid of his houseguest but feels an odd attraction to him. This attraction is also felt by Tess, the daughter of the estate caretaker, who steps into Piers' life just in time to complicate the plot and to confuse Piers even more by renaming him Jan, for the two-faced gate keeper. As in the other books, the protagonist of *Toll*

Bridge is disenfranchised from society, and like the others, he struggles with a gamut of conflicts before finding his way.

The story of *Piers* is deceptively simple. Here is a teenage boy, an overachiever in school, one year younger than his peers, having been double promoted because of his outstanding intellectual abilities. His teachers think of him as an excellent student, though he does seem a bit detached at times, and his grades do slip in the term before he graduates. His classmates find him harder to get to know, thinking of him as too intellectual, especially when he's deep in another bout of depression, what he describes as the "glums." *Piers'* parents, like most of the parents in Chambers' novels, are kind, respectable folks who want what is best for their son and unfortunately, seem to have a different idea of what is best than *Piers* does. Add to the mix a devoted girlfriend, Gill, who loves *Piers* despite his moods and can't understand why he views her need for affection and reassurance as suffocating him.

With all of this going for him, it is no wonder that *Piers* sinks into a deep state of depression. As the novel opens, he has escaped his world of great expectations by taking a job in the country. The job entails living in a toll bridge house on a large estate and taking in the tolls for those wanting to pass the private bridge. The house is cold, damp, lonely, just the place for a young man who needs time to think. In America, we call this finding ourselves. In Britain, *Piers'* family, school, and girlfriend call it downright odd.

We first see *Piers* as he first sees Adam. It is a cold night in the tollhouse, and *Piers* is awakened by the intrusion of an uninvited guest. This stranger is thin but muscular and moves with athletic grace. He is also dripping wet from having fallen into

the river. When he sees Adam in his house all wet from head to toe, Piers thinks at first that he will throw him out. But when Adam, who is now stripping out of the soaked clothes, asks for something to eat, Piers surprises himself by saying yes. Though he is suspicious of the stranger, Piers feels a willingness because he has lived alone for three months in the tollhouse.

The loneliness is intentional. Though his parents and his girlfriend Gill write him every week, he cannot yet return their letters because of the glums that he is experiencing. The only recurring contact with other human beings is with the family of the caretaker. The caretaker has a daughter named Cathy, who prefers the name Tess. Tess' family helps take care of Piers while he is taking time off to get his thoughts together. The uninvited guest, Adam, decides to stay awhile. Piers is uneasy about the situation, but matters turn for the worst when Tess visits *The Toll Bridge* and sees Adam for the first time. She is immediately wooed by his looks and by his animalistic demeanor. She talks Piers into allowing Adam to stay, though Piers doesn't need that much convincing. For his part, Piers feels more than a small pang of jealousy when he realizes that Tess is attracted to Adam.

Life goes on uneventfully for a time. Tess and Piers grow closer, and it is she who convinces Piers that he is not ready to respond in a civil way to his parents and girlfriend's letters. She urges him to console them and to let them know that he is doing well, but his glums and his need to be left alone to find his own way of life prevent him from expressing common courtesy. During this time, two significant things happen for Piers. First, Tess gives him a new Christian name. She names him Jan, short for Janus,

the mythical keeper of the bridge to Hades. Like Janus, Tess thinks that Piers has two faces--one full of the glums and pessimistic, the other lively intellectual, and thoughtful. Like Janus Piers is the keeper of a bridge and the metaphor continues throughout the rest of the novel. Now Jan/Piers is given some bad news. The owner of the estate is putting it up for sale, and Piers will be forced to renovate the tollhouse by himself, mostly by giving it a new coat of paint. Jan realizes that he will be unable to complete the paint job on time by himself. So when Adam offers to trade work for a place to live, Jan reluctantly agrees. Inside, though, he realizes that he enjoys Adam's company as much as the help he will get doing the painting job.

After three weeks of painting, Jan comes down with flu-like symptoms. The caretaker diagnoses him with painters' colic and takes him home to nurse him back to health. This leaves Adam alone in the tollhouse to finish the painting job. Tess not only helps nurse Jan back to health, but she also decides to pitch in with the painting job. Alone in the house with Adam, she is overwhelmed by his magnetism, and she and the mysterious stranger with one name have sex in the middle of the floor, surrounded by paint and drop cloths. Unknown to them, they are caught in the act by both Jan and later her father, neither of whom interrupts. Jan is convinced that they would not notice him in their ecstasy, and her father is too dismayed to speak. This act and a surprise party that Tess throws to celebrate the completion of the paint job change the lives of everyone forever.

The surprise party is for Jan. He returns to the tollhouse (led by Tess) to find it full of people, including Adam drinking and playing suggestive sexual party games. Jan

is further surprised by the appearance of his girlfriend, Gill, who had been invited by Tess to the party. Gill arrives just in time to see Tess and Jan playing a party game. Furious, she storms out of the tollhouse, with Tess and Jan in pursuit. An argument follows, one in which Jan is made out by the two girls Tess and Gill as the bad guy. Jan, realizing that he has no chance of being heard, returns to the party. After a short conversation, Tess also returns to the party, and Gill ventures out to the river where she accidentally slips into the water. By happenstance, Adam is nearby and tries to save her. However, Gill thinks she's being attacked by a pervert and strikes out against Adam. He hits his head and falls into the river. By the time things are sorted out and Adam is pulled from the river, half-dead and almost frozen, Gill has returned home, realizing that her relationship with Jan is over. Tess also realizes that she made a mistake by bringing Gill to the party, and Jan, though he has no intention of continuing his relationship with Gill, realizes that he has behaved badly.

The plot takes another twist when Adam awakens from his injuries not knowing who anyone is. He doesn't even remember that his name is Adam. He seems to be a different person, more high strung, less happy-go-lucky. He spends the next couple of days with Tess and Piers, trying to remember his life from the recent past, but he seems haunted by memories that he did not have before. Adam tries to drown himself in the river but is thwarted by Tess and Jan who discover him in the nick of time. The police are called, everyone is questioned, and the two young adults are chastised for their failure to turn Adam over to the authorities earlier.

Tess and Jan learn soon that Adam is not their friend's real name, and that he has a secret past he has been running from. His real name is Aston, and when he was fourteen, he killed another boy in a playground fight. Unable to deal with the guilt surrounding the murder, he was placed in a mental institution. Just before his arrival at the tollhouse, he escaped the mental institution in a state that psychiatrists call a fugue. In this fugue, he completely forgot his identity, and it was Jan who gave him a new name, Adam, by saying " I don't know you from Adam " when they first met. Jan learns this information from a letter from Aston and from a visit he pays the mental institution. The Adam that he knew is replaced the young man named Aston, who has regressed to the age of twelve, a psychological defense meant to begin his life anew before he committed the murder at fourteen. He, of course, doesn't recognize Jan and he never will. Now a couple, Jan and Tess realize that their lives have been touched deeply by this ghost of a boy and likely will never be the same again.

The Toll Bridge works well as a friendship novel, a wonderful piece of telling about the friendships and loves that young adults encounter. As an author, Chambers himself would agree that a piece of literature is in its basic level a good story. But like most of Chambers' other novels, *The Toll Bridge* has many levels of understanding. The metaphor of the two-faced guard is not only descriptive of the protagonist, Jan/Piers, but of the other characters of one as well. The boy with no name, Adam, is actually named Aston. Tess, whose father prefers her given name, Cathy, also tries on identities for size. Chambers weaves artistic mastery of style with a superb understanding of complex

human relationships. The question for the reader, then, is what lessons can one learn from reading the novel?

An examination of the style that Chambers uses to create *The Toll Bridge* will reveal many of the artistic and structural devices that he used in other novel novels that form the sextet. Though divided into chapters, the novel does not follow the traditional narrative line, nor does it follow a traditional narrative voice. The first chapter starts with Piers carrying the narration of the story, but his narration is quickly interrupted by that of Tess, marked with italics, which allows the reader to realize that Tess like us is reading the book, and we are allowed to read the notes that she makes about the authenticity of the action sequences. Chambers is “especially talented in creating dialogue among witty teens who clearly cherish language as much as he does.” (Hipple, 1996)

The actual sentences of the novel are descriptive and short, and have a distilled quality, moreso than the more elaborate language he used in the early novels such as *Breaktime*. Because this is a semi-epistolary novel, with the exchanges between the Tess and Jan, and Jan and his family and girlfriend, the sense of time is suspended and may even go backward. Characters comment on previous actions and to what they have previously written. They are even prone to flash-forward in the story to argue about what is to come. Rather than building tension and conflict through a chain of events that are interconnected, Chambers uses the characters’ interaction to simultaneously explore them and reveal the plot to the reader. This technique is most similar to that used in making *NIK: Now I Know*. The dialogue in the story tends to alternate between long philosophical passages and short, pithy exchanges between the main characters,

especially between Tess and Jan. Chambers' young people are bright and revel in language. Critics point out that "[a]s in his previous books (*Breaktime*, *Dance on My Grave*, and *NIK: Now I Know*), Chambers dazzles readers with exciting sentences and paragraphs that snap, crackle, and pop" (Hipple, 1996). Words and double meanings roll easily from characters' tongues as they explore sexual, emotional, and intellectual themes.

It is a signature of Chambers to create several points of view within a novel. In this respect, *The Toll Bridge* is no different. The point-of-view is generally shared between Tess and Jan, with Jan carrying most of the narrative. Jan's narrative is usually one of two types. For most of the novel, he takes on an "interested observer" point-of-view, relating actions as they happen without interpreting them for the reader. At times, especially on an important event, he slants the narrative or the actions of the plot to fit his interpretation. This is a technique that Chambers first created in *Breaktime* with Ditto, a character who was living the fiction that he was creating. This often makes the reader wonder whether the actions happened as they are depicted by Jan or whether he is picking and choosing among events to support his own pieces.

Tess brings her point-of-view to the narration later in the novel, adding a new perspective to the importance of the novel. For example, she comments on the surprise party and on the sexual rendezvous that she had with Adam. She adds another perspective and shows the reader new details that Jan can't. She can tell us how she felt during the infamous intercourse, while Jan can only tell us how he felt watching the two and interpreting their actions.

At the end of the novel, however, the point-of-view shifts back to “limited observer” point-of-view as Jan watches Aston as a twelve-year-old. He is unable to reflect upon this experience, and we get the sense that it is happening, not as he perceived it but as it actually occurred. There are other points of view in the novel, limited to the letters written by Jan's parents and girlfriend to him. In these we get the sense of their personalities and of the pressure that they are placing on him. This wide array of perspectives helps us understand the character and also lends itself to the complex human emotions and relationships that Chambers explores. Because Chambers has used these techniques for over two decades, the transition from one narrative to another is seamless and happens in the natural flow of the story. The time of the novel shifts to present to past and even the future with a smoothness that reminds one of the finest Faulkner.

Chambers himself has made the distinction between writing for entertainment and writing for the intellect. While *The Toll Bridge* is certainly entertaining, it also appeals to the intellect because of the complex metaphor that he creates with a novel. In *The Toll Bridge* Chambers creates the two faced metaphor of Janus the bridge keeper. Like a metaphysical conceit, he ties much of the action and the characterization into the metaphor. For example, the protagonist Piers, can be regarded as two people. One of those people is the bright student, the perfect child, and the perfect boyfriend. He has a bright future at the university and has the ability to have a successful life. The road seems mapped out for him, and all he has to do is fall in step. The other person is a dark one, one who falls into depression, one who feels all too well the pressures of school and family. He leaves home as Piers, to find himself in a desolate tollhouse. Ironically, the

person he finds is not himself as someone different, but instead, a new face that a new friend names "Jan." Metaphorically, he is standing on a breach in his life. One side is the life expected of him. On the other side it is a life he desires but knows nothing about and he tends the bridge that links the two lives.

Other characters in the novel have two faces as well. Tess, the daughter of a caretaker of the estate, seems to be the consummate loyal daughter. However, she is too bright for her station in life and unlike the boys she knows, openly inquisitive about sex and relationships between males and females. Her family calls her Cathy but friends call her Tess. Like other female characters in Chambers novels (the girl from *Breaktime* who uses sex to escape her mundane life or the girl from *NIK: Now I Know* who sees sex as a natural extension of her spiritual self), Tess enjoys the physical world and is more willing than the males around her to take chances with it.

The mystery man in the novel, Adam, is no one. Unlike Tess and Jan, he isn't trying to find himself. He has truly lost his identity, in part because of a psychological fugue (an altered state of consciousness similar to self-induced amnesia). When Adam meets Jan, he has no idea who he is, but unlike Jan, he knows exactly who he wants to be. This Adam, this new identity, is alive, is brimming with sexual energy, as well as a flippant attitude about life. In fact, Adam, whose real name is Aston, is a psychotic murderer whose greatest fear is killing again. The person he invents is his own antithesis. Because he can't deal with being a person who murders, he becomes someone entirely different.

Chambers explores the themes indirectly by contrasting one character from the other. His juxtaposition and his use of metaphor to illustrate the characters dual aspects subtly shows the toll we all pay in the passage of life.

Though the characters of Jan, Tess, and Adam carry the novel's action, there are several minor characters worth note. Gill, the girlfriend of Piers/Jan, is a bright girl, though not as bright as Jan is. She is attracted to Jan's physical build and intrigued by his moody nature.

She is unable to cope with his need for solitude, and when he doesn't answer the dozens of letters that she sends to the tollhouse, she is, of course, hurt. She needs companionship and compassion from Jan, but she is unable to see that he cannot give those things to her. And she is unable to see that Jan's aloof nature is inherently part of his glums, the state of depression that causes him to separate himself from everyone. Gill is not a bad person.

In fact, on the standard scale of good and bad, she is probably a better person than Jan, something that he would readily admit. She is loyal to him even when she shouldn't be, and his lack of concern for her feelings hurts terribly.

The complexity of *The Toll Bridge* is something that critics have noticed. One critic points out that Jan, Tess, and Adam are a "threesome [that] becomes enmeshed in a drama that leaves them—and readers—more than a bit breathless" (1996). Perhaps Hipple says it best when he writes of *The Toll Bridge* in *The ALAN Review*: "A marvelous wordsmith and magical storyteller, English author Aidan Chambers has again written a compelling novel that sophisticated adolescents and their mentors will love" (1996).

CHAPTER V

Minor Works and Characters

Though he considers the novels in the proposed sextet his finest, Chambers has written longer works of fiction intended for audiences other than literate teens. As a publisher of children's literature, he is keenly aware of the need for younger readers, intermediate readers, to have interesting chapter books to enjoy. To this end he wrote two novels to appeal to those readers. They are not the art he intended to create with the sextet, but these two novels, because of the virtuosity of their creator, deserve attention. The other works in this chapter are Chambers' older works. They are interesting because they contain the seeds of a mature storyteller, and it is possible to gain some insight into Chambers' evolution as a writer by examining them.

Cycle Smash

Pete is an Olympic class cross-country runner. Still a high school student, he draws accolades from the scouts for the National cross-country team. The novel begins with Peter in the locker room shower cutting up with his friends on the track team. He is obviously arrogant, although he puts on a face and good manners make him pretend to be otherwise.

It seems as if Pete has his life in high gear. He has just led his team to another victory against another school, and is excited about the prospect of scouts selecting him for the national team. He seems to have only one weak spot, and that is for girls. He writes this off with his friends, telling them that he is a better runner and a better biker, so he has to let them win at something.

But it isn't long before Pete proves that he is no super man. The same night as the conversation in the locker room, he takes his motorcycle out for a ride. The intersection near his house is very dangerous, even though he drives very carefully. He inches up to the intersection, listens for traffic, and then crosses.

Pete awakens sitting on the curb looking at his foot. It is obvious that he is in a state of shock because the information about his wreck comes only in tiny details. First, he looks at his sock, then at the blood soaking throughout. He does not realize that a car has hit him, even after passing out on the sidewalk and being revived by the ambulance drivers. He awakens in the hospital talking to the doctor and a nurse who asks for his parents' name and address. The doctor wants to get permission to amputate the injured leg and foot. Despite the searing pain, Pete stays awake long enough for them to contact his parents.

When Pete finally regains consciousness, the doctor has good news: he did not have to amputate the leg. Pete's healing will be long and drawn out and he must wear a cast from foot to hip. The injury is still open and bleeding into the cast, a fact that disturbs Pete greatly. He wishes that the leg had been amputated because he will not be able to run in cross-country races any longer.

Over the next few days, Pete sinks into a state of depression. He gets the reputation from the ward nurses of been depressed and combative. He yells at the nurses, a sin in a British hospital, and refuses to accept that his injury is an accident. He continues to wallow in self-pity until they move him into a wheel chair. His newfound ability to move around helps, as does a young nurse who seems to share a crush with Pete.

On a tour of the hospital the nurse, Jean Gray, and Pete run into another patient who takes Pete's picture. Angry at being photographed in the wheelchair, Pete grabs the camera and rips out the film, destroying the picture. He returns to his room in a tantrum, but the nurse follows him and tells him that the photographer is a 15 year old boy with a heart defect. She yells at him for his self-pity, for thinking that he has it worse than other patients in the hospital.

Pete realizes that he has been behaving like a spoiled brat. He gets new film for Jimmy, and he and the nurse go with Jimmy on a tour of the outside grounds. While there, Pete learns that Jimmy is about to undergo heart surgery again. He has only a 50 percent chance of surviving the surgery. Quickly, Jimmy and Pete form a friendship, the only one that Jimmy has.

The next day, Pete anxiously awaits the word of Jimmy's surgery. The news is bad, however, for Jimmy dies on the operating table. He leaves his camera and a stack of photos he took of Pete, Jean, and himself for Pete to keep. Pete realizes that there is more to life than running races and being a star athlete.

This is Chambers' first book. Like many first novels, it has its flaws. The story is not particularly long, and the plot is too convenient. Pete's problem arises very quickly and disappears almost as quickly with the entrance of Jimmy, an example of the Greek machine of the gods. In this novel, however, there are hints at the great novels to come. Chambers intentionally chose to write about adolescents who are at a crossroads in their lives. The motorcycle wreck in *Cycle Smash* is a precursor to the bike wreck that Barry has in *Dance on My Grave*. Also, Chambers explores the theme of loneliness and isolation that young adult males feel when their identity undergoes a shocking change. Pete's crisis is similar to those faced by Ditto, Nik, Hal, Jan, and William. Each of them is searching for who he is, and struggles against the system that forces him to act in certain ways. Pete's rebellion against the nurses is in a small degree the same behavior that Hal shows when he dances on his lover's grave. His desire to find his own way through his problems can be found in the characters of Ditto and Jan. His parents like those of every other protagonist want to help, but they are at a loss when it comes to dealing with the problems their son is facing.

Seal Secret

Aidan Chambers describes *Seal Secret* as a quiet book that is largely overlooked (S. D. Gill, personal communication, November 4, 1997). There are several reasons why this may be true. This thin novel was aimed at the intermediate reader, and Chambers scaled back most of his linguistic prowess with audience in mind (thus not giving it the

status of "art" he reserves for books written with little regard to audience). The story itself is straight-forward. Add to this the timing of the publication—it came out within two years of two sextet novels and several non-fiction books—and there is little doubt why *Seal Secret* has not been highly regarded.

William is angry about his family's holiday. Normally, they go to the seashore, but this year, Will's mother has decided that she is tired of the hustle and bustle of the resort towns. She and Will's father would rather rent a house in the country than stay their normal week in a trailer.

Will, however, thinks the country is boring. When they first arrive, Will is in a snit. His parents both scold him for his behaviour, which doesn't improve until the family meets the owner of the House, who is named Miss James. Miss James is kind to William, more kind than his parents who see him as the burden. They are more concerned with getting him out of their hair than with his happiness. Miss James gives William a Coke when he arrives, then shows him around the country.

William decides to venture out on his own. Before a while he follows the long road that led them to the cottage, but he tires quickly, not being used to the country life. So he decides to climb a tree to have a look around. Unfortunately, he is still dressed in his best clothes, and it only takes a few seconds before he has ruined every stitch of clothing he has on, including his shoes. To make matters worse he is confronted by a red headed boy who makes fun of William for being up the tree and offers to "smash his prissy face in." Angry, William can only stutter a reply. Whenever he is nervous or afraid he stutters and his parents both despise this habit. When he gets back to the cottage,

William catches it from his parents about his ruined clothes. Miss James comes to his rescue after he is sent to his room. She admires his artwork and invites him to look around the farm. The first place they visit is the row of cow barns in the back. One room of the out-buildings is for storing logs, another is the carpenter's shop, and a third is full of owls and their dropping. In the fourth room Miss Jones shows him a pile of junk including an inflatable dinghy that catches his eye. Before any thing else happens, Miss James' neighbor Gareth Davies shows up. He and Miss James decide that William should go camping with Mr. Davies' son, George. They go in to try the idea out on William's parents. As soon as they are gone, the red headed bully shows up again. This time he challenges William to a one-on-one soccer match, a match that William loses badly. The adults return and are delighted to see that George and William have already begun playing together. William is stunned to learn that the bully and George are one and the same, and he is required to spend the rest of his vacation with this boy.

At first George balks at going camping. Soon he realizes that he will only get on his parent's nerves if he stays in the cabin all week. George is no happier about having William than William is to be had. However, George's father has offered to help him buy a calf if he will entertain William all week. George is a young entrepreneur: he has several cows already and even at his young age he is trying to raise a herd. His goal is not to surround himself with farm animals, but to make as big a profit as possible. In order to get William to go camping, which will earn him that calf, George lets William in on a secret. They go to the seashore where on a small island cut off from the mainland by high tide but accessible by low tide, George has the secret. After a long trek over sand, water,

and rocks, William finds out what the secret is. In a wall of rocks, George has captured a baby seal. Its mother, having given birth, has left it to shed its white fur and to get hungry enough to swim in the ocean. George has decided to keep the calf himself. His goal is to breed it with another seal and to farm the animals as if they were cattle. It is his theory that with an exploding world population, more people will be turning to alternative sources of meat.

William is disgusted by the idea. The calf is crying, which is what Seal calves do, and hissing and tries to bite him. But he feels an overwhelming sense of compassion for the poor creature. In an act of defiance, he swears to George that he must set the seal free. George does not want the seal freed, and reminds William of his promise to keep the seal a secret. When William continues to argue, George punches him in the face, making his nose bleed. Then he pelts him with stones until William runs away.

That night William hatches a plan to free the seal. He goes into the junk shop and digs out a few items to help him in his quest. The next morning he gets up before sunrise and makes his way back to the seashore where the seal is. The tide is still high so he must wait until it is safe to cross. His plan is to use the inflatable dinghy of Miss Jones to ferry the seal off of the island to a safer spot. The seal, according to plan, will remain there until he is ready to swim. While waiting for a safe passage, William blows up the boat. He becomes impatient after a while, thinking that George the farm boy is already out and on his way to see the seal. He pushes the dinghy to sea and after a harrowing journey, lands on the island where the seal is. Now in a huge hurry, he takes down the rock wall

surrounding the seal and grasping its back flippers to escape its snapping teeth, he drags the seal across the sand and into the dinghy.

At this point he sees George on the far beach waving his hands trying to signal William. He ignores George and pushes the seal and the boat out to sea. They do not get very far before they see an adult seal, possibly the calf's mother, raise its head out of the waves and look at them. A wave and his own panic sweeps William onto the dinghy, and the baby seal returns his favor by taking a bite of his arm. The calf jumps into the ocean and both it and the adult disappear.

Bitten and bleeding, William now faces a greater danger. The sea has become wild, and begins tossing the dinghy around like what it is: a toy boat being rowed by an inexperienced sailor without any force. Within minutes, William is swept out of the boat by the turning tide and crashes into the rocks of a nearby island. He awakens later with a searing pain in his leg, so painful that he cannot even feel the place where the seal bit him. He looks down to find his leg jutting out at an impossible angle, broken. He fades away again, and only awakens when a rescue helicopter drops a rescuer near him. He is air lifted to a nearby hospital, where he is the talk of the children's ward.

Despite the fact that he put himself in great danger, William's escapades earn him the respect of his parents. Miss Jones and Mr. Davies are also impressed. Surprisingly, even George is amazed at William's bravery. He does not seem mad at William at all. Although he has to spend the rest of the vacation and several months to come in a plaster cast from ankle to hip, William enjoys the attention and the new way that people regard him. At first, he wants to tell everyone how he was in the ocean in the first place, but

then he decides that he wants to keep the secret of the seal's rescue to himself. In a final twist, Mr. Davies winks at William and hints that he knows the real reason that he went to sea.

Critics were particularly harsh in their statements about *Seal Secret*. Jan Key (1980) writes that the novel is "a nondescript tale with several promising strands...which could have been more effectively explored..." (p. 377). She finds the characters two-dimensional and the Welsh setting so bland that it "could have been anywhere" (p. 377). Most of her ire is directed at Chambers's style, which she termed "staccato and irritatingly studded with sentences beginning with 'and,' 'but,' and 'then.''" (p.377). But The Junior Bookshelf (1980) is more amendable, admiring the "speed and conviction with which...Chambers establishes the parent/child relationship..." (p. 245).

Critical opinion asides, the novel is exactly what Chambers intended it be—a straightforward story written in a straightforward style for readers who need their own literature. In that sense, *Seal Secret* succeeds.

The Present Takers

In an article about young adult literature, *Literature for Today's Young Adults*, Ted Hipple writes that adolescent literature is written for adolescents (p. xxv). It is a straightforward statement, takes little thought to understand, but it speaks to how important it is for young adults to have a literature that directly addresses them. Some of the most enduring books in our literary history are about the rites of passage, the coming

of age stories. Twain's *Huck Finn*, searching for his identity in the antebellum South, is a coming of age story. So, too, is Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*, which by the above definition, is a young adult novel. The same rites are experienced in Hinton's *The Outsiders*, in Paterson's *Jacob Have I Loved*, in Crutcher's *Chinese Handcuffs*, and in Chambers' *The Present Takers*.

For Chambers, the rite of passage is central to a character's development. In *The Present Takers*, Lucy Hall grows up, as most do, quickly and through a hard set of lessons. These lessons help Lucy define herself as a person and lead her to better understand those around her. *The Present Takers* begins with a warning, a handwritten note to protagonist Lucy Hall. The point-of-view quickly switches to Melanie and her two cronies. These three girls terrorize the school, choosing their victims from their weaker classmates. Today is Lucy's birthday, and for a present, the bullies catch her after her father drops her off from school and hustle her out of sight behind a bike barn. There they twist her arm, literally, and brow beat her with insults until Lucy cries. This is well-rehearsed routine, for they have pulled it many times. Their most common victim is Claire Tonks (Tonks the Tank), a fat girl who, ironically, is on the other side of the barn listening. The only other witness is Angus, who wrote the warning note, but he is unable to help until it is too late. The only hope she can muster is to interrupt the torture and threaten impotently the much larger girls. They laugh at him, and only the bell forces them to let Lucy go. They warn her, though, that the next day she must bring presents or "prezzies" if she wants the harassment to stop.

In class, Lucy withdraws. The girls have ruined her birthday, and during the torture, scuffed her new blue shoes so badly they are worthless. Lucy is feeling worthless, too. When her friend Samantha tries to make contact, Lucy is short with her. She can't muster the attention to do her class work, and it only when Angus slips her another of the notes he has written her daily for weeks that she begins to brighten. Unlike the others, including Claire, Lucy has decided to refuse to bring in the "prezzies."

At home, Lucy hides her new shoes in the back of the closet and tries to hide her mood from her mother. Busy with bookkeeping from the shop that her husband manages, Mrs. Hall allows Lucy to keep quiet. Feeling she has no other choice, Lucy attempts to pay off Melanie with a five-pound note she got for her birthday. Melanie scoffs at the money, but keeps it, warning Lucy she still isn't off the hook.

Later that evening, Melanie asks Angus to the movies on Lucy's five pounds. Angus, hoping to learn more about Melanie's plans, agrees. During the date, he learns that Melanie is planning to force Lucy to steal a tape from the local Woolworth's. But Angus gets in too late to call Lucy, and by the time he wakes the next day and makes his way to Woolworth's, Melanie has indeed tricked Lucy into Woolworth's and has stuffed a music tape into her pants. Angus warns Lucy and tries to return the tape. Melanie storms out. But a store detective catches Angus with the tape, and he and Lucy are detained. Their parents are called, and the whole story comes out. Mrs. Hall wants to intervene, but her attempt to talk to Melanie's mother meets with the same verbal bullying that Lucy faced at school. Lucy and Angus realize that if they are ever to find peace, they will have to defeat Melanie by making her deeds public knowledge. They talk their classmate into

filling the end-of-the year newspaper with riddles and jokes about the abuse many of them have received at Melanie's hand. When she sees the paper, Melanie goes into a rage and destroys the classroom. Her outbreak gets Melanie sent to another school to finish the term, and Lucy, Angus, and their classmates learn an important message about friendship.

The Present Takers gives Chambers a chance to show his skill at writing a traditional coming-of-age narrative. The book is written using a straightforward narrative train, and though it alternates point-of-view, it maintains a consistent narrative voice. This consistency becomes apparent in the opening chapter, when Chambers switches from the three bullies to Angus. The language used to describe the girls is the language of power: To describe Angus, Chambers turns softer, but the voice remains the same. These jumps, though, show Chamber's craftsmanship.

While the construction of *The Present Takers* is not as intricate as the montage of stylistic quirks of *Dance on My Grave*, it is still a fairly complex structure with shifting points of view (at least ten) and uses a few typographical stunts of its own. There is one primary narrative point-of-view: the three-person limited point-of-view of the novel, but it is balanced by the perspectives of the other characters, including Angus, Lucy's mother and father, Angus' father, the bully Melanie, her mother, the teacher Mrs. Harris, a store manager, detective, and shop clerk. Chambers' creates believable characters. The role of a character is two-fold--to engage the reader emotionally and to drive the events of the story. Chambers' characters do each well.

Minor Characters: Parents and Teachers

In some adolescent novels, the protagonist finds support from the adults in his or her troubled life. Yet in Chambers' novels adults often are too removed from their children to provide effective guidance. It is not that the parents in Chambers' novels are bad people; they simply represent the schism that is universally present in any relationship between parent and child. Because Chambers' protagonists still are usually at a crisis point in their lives, parents are often part of the reason they are seeking a new direction. That is not to say that parents are unimportant characters, akin to the faceless adults in Charlie Brown's world. Chambers says that:

All the characters in my stories are 'important' to me or they wouldn't be there in the first place. I tried to understand them as people rather than merely as functionaries in the tale. Of course, just as in life, some of them are more in the foreground, more intimately known than others. One knows more about Lucy's mother in *The Present Takers*, for example, than one knows about Melanie's mother. I remember thinking, when I started writing youth fiction in the sixties, that I disliked the way adults were so often presented as thin, flat, two dimensional characters in children's and young people's fiction, and I decided I'd always trying to present them as fully, as individually, as the young people in my stories (S. D. Gill, personal communication, November 4, 1997).

Most of Chambers' parents are sympathetic characters, people who want to affect their children's lives but who realize, either intuitively or through trial and error, that they

cannot solve all of their children's problems. This is a theme common in Chambers' writing--adolescents solving their own problems.

Like the adults in Chambers' other novels, the parents in *The Toll Bridge* are important characters. Jan's parents are traditional parents with traditional values. They want their son to do well in school, to go to university, and to be a success in life. As he has grown older, they have to have been in less and less communication with him. His bouts of depression seem alien to them, and they struggle to understand. In their letters to him, Jan's mother is worried about her son's health and about how he is going to care about himself. She urges him to write Gill. In sum, she shows the same kind of behavior that Jan is trying to escape. She loves him, that is obvious, but that love for him is smothering. When Jan's father writes him, it is under the auspices of looking out for his wife who is worried about Jan. He begs Jan to write his mother, showing concern not only for his son's need for privacy but to his wife's need to keep up with her child. Underneath this excuse, however, it is apparent that Jan's father is manipulating him into writing by using guilt. This is similar to the attitude other parents in Chambers' novels have had. Tess' father, the caretaker of the estate, is much like the father of Ditto in *Breaktime*. He wants what's best for his daughter, but he doesn't understand the life she chooses and the attitudes and morals that she holds.

One parent who has to learn the hard way to let her daughter grow up is Mrs. Hall from *The Present Takers*. It is Mrs. Hall who lets us know initially how disturbed Lucy is by the bullying. After Lucy returns from school, Mrs. Hall notices that she is moping around, depressed, an unusual state for her daughter, whom we learn is usually upbeat.

Mrs. Hall tries to intercede, to make Lucy talk about her problem. Lucy withdraws, though, and we hear Mrs. Hall's concern. Later, after Lucy is forced to tell the whole tale, Mrs. Hall decides to confront Melanie's mother. By contrast, Melanie's mother is the perfect mother. Her house is beautiful, furnished in expensive modern decor, and she dresses in the latest fashions. It's obvious that Melanie's family has enough money that she doesn't need to extort it from others. But there is something wrong in the house. The same could be said of Cynthia. On the surface, she seems to have a relationship with her daughter, but under her breath, she calls her a "cow," and berates her. Mr. Hall seems to be the wisest of the adults on hand. This is unusual for Chambers' work. Other novels such as *Breaktime* and *Dance on My Grave* use insightful adults--usually teachers to help the protagonists find their way in life. In *The Present Takers*, only Mr. Hall takes this role, and he does so in a passive way. Structurally, his most important role is to give Lucy (and through her, the reader) insight into why Melanie is the person she is.

In *Dance on My Grave*, Hal's parents try to be supportive of their son. After the family moves to Southend, they understand his shyness and reluctance to join the social order of the area. They are unaware of his homosexual lifestyle, and even though shocked by his behavior of dancing on Barry's grave, support him and try, though poorly, to help him work through his problems. They cooperate with the social worker assigned to Hal's case. One suspects that Hal is much more intelligent than his parents are. That coupled with his sexual preference keeps them from fully understanding their son. In the end, they are unable to help him overcome his loss of Barry. Barry's mother is unlike Hal's parents. At the beginning of the novel, she is the epitome of the mother hen. After

Barry brings Hal home from the river, wet and sick, Barry's mother cleans him up, dresses him, and stuffs him with food. While Barry and Hal are together, the mother smothers him with affection and revels in the attention that Hal shows Barry and, through him, the record shop that she and her son operate. After Barry's death, however, his mother is unable to stand Hal, mostly because Hal insists on desecrating Barry's grave. She calls the police on Hal and sets in motion the events of Hal's arrests and supervision by the social worker.

In *Breaktime* Ditto's parents are from a different class than the people he attends school with. This bothers Ditto's father, who is disabled and thinks that academic world is a bunch of hogwash. This, as well as his father's soured disposition at being disabled, puts Ditto at odds with his father. They argue constantly, even when they try to get along with each other. Ditto's mother tries to be supportive of her son and of her husband. She among all the parents in Chambers' fiction is the most integral to the story. It is she who suggests that Ditto go on a short trip, and it is she who, by revealing to Ditto his father's past, helps the two come to understand each other.

Nik's parents are almost invisible. Nik's father is not directly involved in his life, although almost no one is involved in Nik's life. Julie the working girl is older, but her faith has led her to disassociate with her family. It is not an intentional rift, but is more due to Julie's devotion to her faith and her relentless pursuit of it. In *Seal Secret* the parents are somewhat one-dimensional. Unlike the other parents, especially those in the sextet, William's parents have a demented streak. His mother sees him as something just another bother, so her only goal is to get him out of the house and out of her way. For his

part, William's father is not much better. He is not only looking to avoid William, he is equally interested in avoiding his wife. Without parental guidance, William turns to other adults in the novel to help him with his problem with the seal.

The teacher in *Dance on My Grave*, Jim Osburn, who helps Hal by deflecting the questions of the police and the social worker is modeled after the Jim Osburn who helped young Aidan Chambers do well in school and eventually go to the University. Like the real Osburn, the fictional Jim Osburn is taciturn, curmudgeonly, witty, and interested in nothing but doing what is best to help his students. If not for Osburn, Hal probably would not have survived the crisis over Barry's death. *The Present Takers*, unlike *Dance on My Grave*, has no concerned teacher. Mrs. Harris, the children's classroom teacher, is blithely unaware of the terrorist activities in her classroom. She gives no indication of knowing Melanie's true personality, and even when she notices unusual behavior by the best students in class, she gives it no pause. At her worst, she is cruel.

Either good or bad or indifferent, the adults in Chambers' fiction play an important role in the development of adolescents. Chambers believes that we "never escape our parentage. So parents are bound to have an important place in any story that deals with growing up, as most of mine do" (S. D. Gill, personal communication, November 4, 1997).

CHAPTER VI

The Once and Future Chambers

With the books he has written, edited, and published, Aidan Chambers sought to draw attention to pre adult readers. Throughout his long career, which is well into its fourth decade, he has been England's most prominent and hardest working advocate of this genre. Chambers' desire to move adolescent literature beyond its previous state of the sentimental penny novel has taken him on quite a ride. His life has been equally complex in the journey, and as he has grown older, he has increased his workload, instead of diminishing it. Not only does he still help run Thimble Press, the children's press that he founded with his wife, but he has joined forces with an Australian press to produce adolescent literature there. This venture was begun when he was well into his fifties. He still edits periodicals as well, and reviews books of other authors. He has not lost his interest in reading education. As a matter of fact, this next book will not be part of the dance sequence, but the new volume of a series about reading that will serve as a companion to *Booktalk*. The new one will be called *Reading Talk* (S. D. Gill, personal communication, November 4, 1997).

His editing role still continues. He has edited several volumes of ghost stories, which include ghosts in Great Britain and from around the world. He has also edited comic, science fiction, and sports anthologies, as well as a dash of poetry here and there.

He has contributed to series as well, including those for television. If adolescent literature has a Renaissance man, it is Aidan Chambers. Add to his editing, publishing, and reviewing schedule, Chambers continues to teach as well. He shows few signs, if any, of slowing down. Now sixty-four, he is as concerned with children and their literature as he was when he left the monastery in 1967.

But why? What is there left to do for Aidan Chambers that he has already not accomplished? Why not slow down and smell the roses? For Chambers that answer is quite easy. When asked this question he usually uses:

[t]he analogy of the mother and her large family. I like them all differently.

The first born just because it was the first, the latest born because it is the latest and still so vulnerable and in need of help. There is the one that no one ever talks about, *Seal Secret*, but just goes about its business quietly as the one that that is very successful but refuses to leave home and keeps on demanding attention, *Dance*. There's a thoughtful one, *Nik*. And so on. In other words, my view of each book is conditioned by all kinds of extra textual circumstances to do with its inception, its writing, its reception, and so on. And the fact is that none of them has totally satisfied me, which is one reason, not the only one of course, why I go on writing more. One day I hope to write a book that will be totally satisfying (S. D. Gill, personal communication, November 4, 1997)

In pursuit of the book that will satisfy him, Chambers continues to write. In the past year he has written two plays:

Only Once is for a group of the theatre students. It was first performed on October 14; I am now preparing it for publication. The others is a stage version of *The Toll Bridge*, which will be produced by a group of Flemish actors next year, they commissioned me to work with them on this project. I'm not sure whether to publish this. It is for only three actors and is not the version I'd have written if it were not a limit (S. D. Gill, personal communication, November 4, 1997).

Chambers shows his deep love for the theater and wishes he could spend his time working on it, writing novels either side of play writing. He has written two plays this year while still working on a novel and has another in mind for next year.

Currently, he is working on the novel called *Postcards From No Man's Land*, set in Holland, mostly in Amsterdam. It is the fifth book in the sextet, which he calls the "Dance sequence." Chambers describes it as a novel whose:

central character is a 17 year-old boy called Jacob Todd. His grandfather, also called Jacob, fought during the second World War at the Battle of Arnhem, the famous *Bridge Too Far*. He was wounded during the battle, was rescued and hidden by the Dutch family (not an uncommon event during that battle) and died before he was fit enough to escape. He is buried in the battle cemetery at Oosterbeek, where the worst of the fighting occurred. Young Jacob goes to Holland in 1995, to visit his grandfather's grave and the old woman who, as a young woman of nineteen, was the daughter of the family who looked after his grandfather. During his trip of course much happens that is significant in his

understanding of life, death, history, himself and other people. Like all the other books it involves love stories (in this case one of the love stories is about falling in love with a place, as well as with a person). Like all the others it is about language itself, about story, about consciousness and coming to an understanding of who and what you are or want to be. And at the heart of this novel are two moral dilemmas. One has to do with honesty, the other with the right to die decently (S. D. Gill, personal communication, November 4, 1997).

There was a time, however, when some of Chambers' close associates wondered if he would keep working. After his first editor at Bodley Head died, he was faced with the decision of whether or not to retire. "Could I publish and go on writing," Chambers writes in *SAAS*, "my friends asked, clearly thinking the answer was *no*." (p. 55). He goes to add:

Of course, I said I could. But the honest answer is that I don't know. It was another of those moments, like deciding I wanted to be a writer, like deciding to join the Community and deciding to leave it, like deciding to get married and deciding to start Thimble Press: intuition tells me it has to be done. Not that it is necessarily the worldly-wise thing to do, nor that it is bound to succeed; only that it must happen, that it is waiting for me. At such times I have always trusted intuition and always will, for its understandings, its perceptions, are drawn from a different, far older, far deeper well of knowledge than the shallow roots of rational thought can yet tap (p. 55).

This hunger for knowledge is what still drives Chambers through his daily routine. Life is settled for him now, but it is no less an adventure. Perhaps it is fitting to end the story of a writer with how he has seen his life.

So now, at fifty-five years of age, I sit in my room at home all morning and struggle, as I have always found it a struggle, to author books that matter to me—the one ever-constant desire of my life and the activity that makes everything else possible. During the afternoons and early evenings I work as a publisher in my Turton & Chambers office five minutes' walk from home, with Nancy and Thimble Press busily engaged next door. And for a few days every year I can still enjoy teaching as a tutor of student teachers at Westminster College, Oxford.

I know that my life is privileged and rewarding beyond measure, and I'm thankful for that, but I do not think of myself as successful and won't until I have written a book that satisfies me by matching in its object-ified, printed form the rich density of the imagined original. In this respect, nothing has changed since I was fifteen. I am also just as unsure of myself and as sure of failure, as unhappy with crowds of people; still prefer being at home to being anywhere else; still find in reading both the best of pleasures and the best means of keeping some kind of grip on life. And I am still kept going only by the belief of another (Chambers, 1991, p. 55).

REFERENCES

NOTES AND REFERENCES

Alderson, B.W. (1968). [Review of the book Cycle Smash]. Children's Book Review, 3, 196.

Carlsen, G. Robert (1984). Teaching literature for the adolescent. English Journal, 73, 28-30.

Chambers, Aidan (1991). Aidan Chambers. In Something about the author autobiography series (Vol. 12, pp. 37-55). Detroit: Gale.

Chambers, Aidan (1983). Introducing books to children. New York: Heinemann.

Contemporary Literary Criticism (Vol. 35, pp. 97-101). (1985). Detroit: Gale.

DeLuca, Geraldine (1979). Taking true risks: Controversial issues in new young adult novels. The Lion and the Unicorn, 3, 125-148.

Donelson, Ken and Nilsen, Allene (1997). Literature for today's young adults. New York: Longman.

Fisher, Margery (1978). [Review of the book Breaktime]. Growing Point, 17, 3418-19.

Fisher, Margery (1982). [Review of the book Dance on My Grave]. Growing Point, 21, 3928.

Fisher, Margery (1983). [Review of the book The Present Takers]. Growing Point, 22, 4164.

Fisher, Margery (1987). [Review of the book NIK: Now I Know]. Growing Point, 26, 4972.

Hann, Sandra (1984). [Review of the book The Present Takers]. The School Librarian, 32, 734.

Hipple, Ted (1997). Aidan Chambers. In T. W. Hipple (Series Ed.) Writers for young adults (Vol. 1, pp. 219-227). New York: Scribners.

Hipple, Ted (1996). [Review of the book The Toll Bridge]. ALAN Review, 23.

Holmes, Sally (1989). Aidan Chambers. In Sixth book of junior authors and illustrators (pp. 53-56). New York: H.W. Wilson.

Hutchinson, Barbara (1987). [Review of the book NIK: Now I Know]. School Library Journal, 33, 38.

Kaye, Marilyn (1979). [Review of the book Breaktime]. School Library Journal, 25, 70-71.

Key, Jan (1980). [Review of the book Seal Secret]. The School Librarian, 28, 377.

Linne, Rob (1996). Coming of age and coming out: Representations of gays and lesbians in young adult literature. Taboo: The Journal of Culture and Education, 4, 71-87.

Maguire, Gregory (1983). [Review of the book Dance on My Grave]. Horn Book, 3, 308.

Nesso, Christine (1977). Aidan Chambers. In Contemporary Authors (Vol. 25, p. 133). Detroit: Gale.

Olendorf, Donna (1992). Aidan Chambers. In Something About the Author (Vol. 69, pp. 29-33). Detroit: Gale.

Rendle, Adrian (1968). [Review of the book The Chicken Run]. Drama, 91, 62.

[Review of the book Dance on My Grave] (1982). The Junior Bookshelf, 46, 235.

[Review of the book The Present Takers] (1983). The Junior Bookshelf, 47, 255.

[Review of the book Seal Secret] (1980). The Junior Bookshelf, 44, 245.

Sullivan, Eugene (1979). [Review of the book Breaktime]. Bestsellers, 39, 228.

Sutherland, Zena (1983). [Review of the book Dance on My Grave]. Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books, 36, 185.

Roger Sutton (1987). [Review of the book NIK: Now I Know]. Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books, 40, 78.

Telgen, Diane (1990). Aidan Chambers. In Contemporary Authors New Revision Series (Vol. 31, pp. 60-61). Detroit: Gale.

Yates, Richard (1979). You can and can't go home again [Review of the book Breaktime]. New York Times Book Review, 29, 30.

VITA

In 1986 S. David Gill graduated from the University of Tennessee at Knoxville, receiving a Bachelor of Arts degree with a major in English and a concentration in creative writing. From 1989-1996, he was employed by the Chattanooga Public Schools at Brainerd High School. In 1992 he completed a Master of Education in Curriculum and Instruction, with a concentration in English education.

In May, 1998 he completed his Doctor of Education degree at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville. His course work focused on young adult literature and literacy education, both at the elementary and secondary level.